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The United States is once again experiencing an enormous influx of refugees and immigrants. This generates a number of challenges for the social work profession.

Attention must be given to the differences between voluntary immigrants and traumatized refugees. From the point of view of social workers, each group must be understood in terms of its own cultural framework of meaning. There are, for example, important differences among Montagnard, Bosnian, and Liberian newcomers. Social workers must become conscious of their own cultural framework of meaning which may very well clash with that of their client.

This study utilizes narrative research methodology to empower Liberian refugee mothers and grandmothers through the telling of their life stories. The oral tradition of storytelling is culturally rooted in African society as a gift of sharing lessons and offering guidance. As these refugee women speak of their experiences, their voices inform social work knowledge and cross cultural practice.

I conducted in-depth interviews with seven Liberian refugee women currently living in the southern region of the United States. I was connected to all these women through refugee support projects. I asked each woman to tell me the story of her life. I tape recorded, transcribed, and analyzed these interviews using narrative research methodology: noting their selectivity (the women constantly made reference to God's protection), silence (the women's omissions may be misinterpreted by the social worker),

slippage (“kin” relations as described by African narrators may not correspond to social work categories).

Although each woman tells her own individual story, she also expresses experiences and interpretations which resonate with the other women. The emphasis of the collective experience in overcoming hardships highlights these women’s views of hope centered in a religious and familial context. These Liberian refugee women know that God will carry them through their suffering. They also know that the survival of their people depends on articulating an ongoing network of caring relationships. The secular professional ethos of social work potentially inhibits the sensitivity of the social worker towards belief systems emphasizing God and kin.

As a marginalized group, the voices of refugees have not been part of prevailing discourse in our society. As victims of persecution, trauma, and violence, refugees have had limited or non-existence personal control of their lives. This study combines an understanding and knowledge of the political, cultural, social, and historical context of Liberians with social work to explore implications that examine cross cultural practice, pedagogy, and research with refugees.

GOD-TALK AND KIN-TALK IN THE SURVIVAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF LIBERIAN  
REFUGEE WOMEN: A RADICAL CHALLENGE FOR SOCIAL WORK

by

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Approved by

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To all refugee mothers who persevere in the pursuit of safety and protection for their children while maintaining courage and hope for the future.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of  
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assisted me as they encouraged me to narrow my inquiry thus sharpening the narratives of my participants for clarity and impact. Dr. Morrison has greatly contributed to my learning as she comes to my committee as an expert in working with refugees and immigrants. By sharing her knowledge of the literature, as well as, her advisement to construct my work to address pedagogy, practice, and research, Dr. Morrison has contributed to the flow and strength of this inquiry.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Overview**

“Without determination you can’t do anything good. You just don’t care. For me, I pray for, to do something good for me and my children. I pray for my children to be somebody good, that’s all.” This statement reflects the tenacity and fortitude of “Divine,”<sup>1</sup> a twice widowed Liberian refugee mother of four, as she expresses her hopes and dreams for her children and their future as newly resettled refugees to America. Divine and six other Liberian refugee mothers/grandmothers shared their life histories with me. These women taught me about their struggle to survive in a world that was not of their own choosing and which was torn apart by war. They shared with me their roles as mothers to provide safety, sustenance, and guidance for their children while maintaining the prospect of hope. These life stories speak to the horror of war and the violence and trauma that these women and their children have experienced as they have fled their homelands in search of safety. In describing their life histories and exodus from Liberia, these women share lessons of resiliency, strength, survival, and hope. In her work with refugees, Pipher (2002) states

Almost all who become wiser and stronger after trauma do so because they develop a sense of purpose that transcends their immediate survival needs and allows them to focus on the future. They survive so that their children can become

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

citizens and go to college, or so that they can become doctors or teachers and help others from their country, or so that they can bring their grandparents to America or write the truth about a bloody regime. This sense of purpose, as necessary to life as oxygen, propels refugees into the future. (pp. 300-301)

Within the last four years the United States has become the new home to many recently arrived refugees from Liberia, Africa. These Liberians have undergone more than fourteen years (1989-2003) of civil war and strife and consequent cultural, economic, educational, and political chaos. Many have personally experienced repeated uprooting, violence and trauma, loss of family, and poverty. And numerous Liberian refugee women have been described as “double flight, female heads of household,” a term that portrays the horrific experience of being separated from spouses and fleeing war multiple times (Schmidt, 2005). The Liberian civil war has affected individuals, families, and whole communities living all over the world. Family members have been separated from one another by death and destruction. As these newcomers are resettled in the U. S., they carry the deep pain and scars of a brutal civil war that has made life deeply uncertain.

Liberian families and their children begin acculturation as refugees in a world that does not always understand their past. Refugee resettlement workers, social workers, university student interns, and volunteers engage with these children and families and hear accounts of their experiences. However, systematic research focusing on Liberian refugees is sparse and more research about their experiences is needed to understand the political, social, and cultural context of these refugees’ in order to assess their strengths

and needs. My dissertation adds to the social work scholarly literature that is significantly limited with respect to our knowledge and understanding of work with Liberian refugees.

My study explores the experiences of Liberian women, their children, and their community; it comprises the life stories of seven Liberian refugee mothers and grandmothers. These newly resettled refugee women reside in Greensboro, North Carolina and Austin, Texas. In creating a space for the voices of these women to be heard, I hope to provide a forum that acknowledges the significant contributions of these women to the survival and sustenance of their families, community, and society. As marginalized citizens of our world, these women and their life experiences have been “invisible.” Poor, uneducated, and persecuted, these women lack power and privilege. However, after unpeeling the opaque layers of inequity and injustice in their narratives, it becomes apparent that their survival is based on an intrinsic strength, resilience, and tenacity. I believe that the epistemology of survival, interpreted through the life stories of these Liberian refugee women, is culturally expressed in their value of God and Kin. Collectively, these stories center on the role of mothering, and the responsibility to protect, train, and raise Liberia’s future generation. The life histories of these women address their commitment to culturally revered values of faith and family. I believe that by understanding the fluid cultural contexts of religion and kinship in Liberia, social workers can more effectively assist these newcomers in healing from their past trauma and to create a future which encompasses hope and dreams for peace.

My study, constructed around the life histories of these women, examines and contributes to a radical change in consciousness for American social workers’



epistemology when working with Liberian refugees. In addition to strengthening and complimenting the practical knowledge of social workers and other community workers, my research contributes to the pedagogical framework for preparing students to work cross culturally. In addition, it seeks to contribute to a philosophical approach to scholarship that is reciprocal and respectful of those who are being studied.

### **Significance of the Study**

As a marginalized group, the voices of refugees have not been part of prevailing discourse in our society. As victims of persecution, trauma, and violence, refugees have had limited or non-existent personal control of their lives. By utilizing Womanist God-Talk theory and ecological theory as a framework, I emphasize the importance of listening to the life stories of these refugee women.

My research seeks to contribute to positive social change on multiple levels: as mothers/grandmothers are empowered and nurtured, their children and families are better understood, and the broader community is strengthened to provide a foundation of support. In utilizing narrative research methodology, my Liberian refugee mothers and grandmothers have been empowered through the telling of their life story. As they speak of their experiences, their voices begin to inform and impact social work practice and research knowledge base. This profound act of empowerment is more poignant since many of these women have limited, or no formal literacy skills and little formal education in Liberia. The outbreak of civil war in their homeland and neighboring countries has further interrupted the opportunity for a secure learning environment for these women and their children. These formal limitations do not impede the value or ability of these

women to tell their story in the least; as Casey (1995-1996) observes, “an especially appealing attribute of oral history is the way in which it can display the assets of those ordinarily considered to have none” (p. 220). Furthermore, this research method is culturally rooted in African society where oral traditions of story telling are honored as gifts for sharing lessons and offering guidance.

In sharing their stories, these women literally pass on their legacy with their children because I gave each woman a copy of her tape recording and her transcript. I believe that honoring and preserving the “voices” of these women positively affects the welfare of their children. Moreover, the successful coping of the mother is a significant factor in their child’s feelings of well being (Drumm, Pittman, & Perry, 2003). An ecological approach considers the influence of all members of a family system on each other and addresses the ecology (interactions among family members) of the family. Therefore the symbiotic process of valuing the person in their environment may also benefit not only the individual, but the family, and the community. In using an ecological approach as my theoretical framework, I hope to address the special needs of refugee women and children and begin to assist them in their healing and throughout the acculturation process.

In addition to the direct benefits to these mothers and their children, I believe that this research may strengthen refugee support systems at wider levels of influence. Specifically, I believe that this study contributes to the professional knowledge of social workers, educators, community resettlement agencies and their partners in understanding the specific needs of this refugee community. Through these insights and awareness,

better policy and practice decisions can be implemented to facilitate the support and acculturation process of Liberian refugees. The voices of these Liberian women need to be heard and valued as significant contributors and stakeholders of their families and their community. Consequently, this process may also act as a catalyst to empower these women to take leadership roles in promoting their community and culture and contribute to the well-being of their children.

This study broadens the theoretical understandings of Liberian refugees' social, educational and mental health supports and needs. These new understandings can help to change the world-view from epistemologies and paradigms centering on Western mental health interventions to frameworks that value the cultural context of African understandings and support systems. Additional information gathered in this study adds to the literature base of narrative research and feminist texts in expanding the professional discourse and guiding future research with Liberian refugee women/families. This work contributes to the value of utilizing narrative research methodology with refugees as it underscores the cultural context of story telling and offers an opportunity where the voices of women refugees can be heard and understood.

This study offers an understanding that the collective experiences of these African women lie in stark contrast to the life of privilege of most Americans. In understanding and valuing these differences, lessons can be learned. These lessons are crucial to understanding the collective discourse of these Africans and to recognize the strengths and resilience of African mothers. I believe that these women, not publicly recognized or

valued in our society, and often invisible, can teach us profound lessons about resilience and strength.

### **Research Goals**

The primary goal of my study is to provide a forum for the voices of Liberian refugee women. My study aims to record the collective life stories of seven Liberian mothers and grandmothers who live in North Carolina and Texas. From the beginning, I was interested in understanding the values, practices and interpretations of “mothering” and the role of African women living in a Western society. I believe that by honoring the stories of these African women that we can gain valuable lessons of humanity, justice, spirit and fortitude. We can better understand how African refugee mothers and grandmothers maintain hope in an apparently hopeless world and how they nurture and guide their children.

My goal in utilizing narrative research, a culturally grounded methodology centered in storytelling, is to place the voices of these women in a valued and honored position. I hope that in lifting their voices, these women can provide powerful testimonies of hope. My inquiry method is compatible and empathetic to the cultural traditions of these women, since storytelling is a valued community practice in sharing information and educating their youth. In appreciating the collective and subjective interpretations of their stories, we allow these women to teach us how to survive in a world that has been torn apart. Their participation in this oral history “gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving them a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making” (Thompson, 1978, p. 226).

In listening and analyzing themes among their collective voices, I aim to learn lessons from these women's stories of suffering, survival, strength, and hope. In describing their narratives I choose to examine African notions of mothering. This focus allows me to interweave concepts of mothering - as nurturing, protecting, guiding, and training with stories of limitation, death and loss. In doing so I question whether this scheme transcends stereotypical definitions of "mother work" as perceived by organizations that provide care for refugees.

A second major objective is to determine whether and how such observations may influence social work practice and pedagogy with refugees, most notably African women and children. My findings contribute to social work practice and research knowledge when working with Liberian refugees. Additionally, I strive to uncover new pedagogical approaches for educating social workers and enriching a cross cultural curriculum. My goal is that this narrative analysis be translated into social work practice, research and pedagogical applications. I hope to open up the discourse among social workers and professionals who work with this community so that social workers can embrace a paradigm that values the role of mothering and religion in strengthening families and communities. I aspire to a dialogue that expands our understanding of the possibilities of hope, peace and love in a war-torn world.

Third, I seek to conduct this research in a reciprocally respectful manner that values the strengths and needs of these women and which give meaning to their voice. In recognizing their expertise and experience, I allow them to become the story tellers. The beauty of narrative research is that it lets the participant guide the research and allows the

listeners to learn from the storytelling. I understand that I am a conduit as well as a learner in this process.

Fourth, I seek to understand the cultural context of the lives of these Liberian refugee women. I aimed to illuminate the strengths, values, and resiliency of these women. From the beginning, I planned on interpreting their stories with an analysis of the social, political, historical, and cultural context. My goal in intersecting these narratives with the historical and cultural background of Liberia is to scaffold these stories in a cultural context.

### **Researcher as Self**

As a former refugee resettlement social worker, I am acutely aware of those injustices of the world caused by war, terror, greed and inhumanity that lead to the displacement of people from their homeland. Through a highly political process in the U. S., certain categories of individuals have been selected for refugee status. This new political status is often accompanied by feelings of relief and hope due to assurances of safety from religious or political persecution, and the promise for basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter, amenities often not available in a refugee camp. However, the anticipation of safety and security also comes with feelings of grief and loss. Individuals gradually understand emotionally and intellectually that they will be not be able to return to their homeland, and that they may face a challenging acculturation process as they transition into a new homeland, and that their lives will be forever changed.

Based on my experiences as a social worker, I decided to examine the life stories of Liberian refugee mothers and grandmothers. My personal life experience also draws

me to this research. As a wife of an African immigrant and the mother of three multicultural/racial children, I am deeply interested in understanding the role of African mothers in parenting. Almost twenty years ago, I was introduced to West African culture, traditions, and customs when I married my Nigerian-born husband. Through this time period, I have apprenticed and learned about the African values of God and Kin. My husband, his extended family, and most importantly my mother-in-law, have schooled me in the cultural expectations of motherhood in African society and about the values of God and Kin as an epistemology of survival. Some of these lessons have been easy to embrace; other lessons have been more challenging to understand and have required patience, reflection and acceptance of differences. From this, I have been able to develop a new lens when working cross-culturally. This process of praxis – both reflection and action, has allowed me to weave new paradigms of understanding about faith and family into my personal epistemology of survival. In conversations with my mother-in-law about her own life history, she became the first African woman to share with me her struggles, suffering, and survival. My mother-in-law embodies African resilience in her experiences as a mother who had two young children die prematurely, as a wife who became a widow in her late thirties, and as a survivor of the Biafran civil war in Nigeria.

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

My study comprises the life histories of seven Liberian refugee women. In the next chapter, I provide a historical context by examining the relationship between the United States and Liberia through a cultural and political lens. I also consider the mental

health of refugees and examine the incongruence of Western mental health approaches when working with African refugees.

My methodology chapter describes the narrative research techniques and process that I have utilized in my study, describing in detail the importance of this culturally compatible method to work with women and refugees. In Chapters IV and V, I describe God-talk and Kin-talk, two activities that embody the values I consider to be crucial in understanding the epistemology of survival in African culture. These chapters utilize the words of my participants to depict God-Talk and Kin-Talk through their stories and collective interpretations. Finally, my last chapter examines social work education in relation to working with Liberian refugees. As a social work educator, I combine an understanding and knowledge of the political, cultural, social, and historical context of Liberians with social work pedagogy to explore implications that examine cross cultural practice, pedagogy, and research with refugees.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction and Overview of Chapter**

Liberia has a relatively short, yet turbulent history. In 1820 descendants of kidnapped Africans (referred to as Americo Liberians) were sent to Liberia to make a new home for themselves, free from slavery and oppression in the U. S. In 1847, Liberia declared its independence from the US; fourteen years before the American Civil War. In 1869, the Liberian True Whig political party was formed and leadership was controlled by the Americo Liberians until Samuel Doe directed a military coup in 1980. From the 1980 until 1989, Liberia experienced disorder under Samuel Doe, who maintained a fragile and corrupt leadership until 1989 when he was brutally tortured and assassinated. Doe's assassination was directed by Prince Johnson, a rebel leader of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) which had split off from another rebel group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Despite his initial leadership, Johnson did not become President of Liberia. NPFL leader Charles Taylor became the next president of Liberia until he was ousted in 2003. Liberians have experienced more than fourteen years of strife since 1989, contributing to cultural, economic, educational, and political instability. "Diamond-rich Liberia is slowly recovering from its 1989-2003 civil war, which left most of the country's infrastructure in ruins and relegated it to its status as one of the world's poorest countries. The fighting left 200,000 dead and displaced half of the

nation's three million people” (Paye-Layleh, 2006). Many Liberians experienced repeated violence and trauma, loss of family, poverty and instability as they were forced to find safe places to live. Despite U. S. historical connections with Liberia and the United States’ financial and political backing of Doe’s government, the United States government took slow action to remedy civil unrest in Liberia. This inaction has worked against the development of trust between the two countries. Rev. Jesse Jackson asserts “The deep historical ties between the U. S. and Liberia warrant moral leadership from the U. S. and not a foreign policy viewed through the lens of race” (Browne, 2003, p. 2). A generation of youth has grown up experiencing a war-torn environment – in either their home country and/or in a refugee camp in a host country. This generation now must acculturate to a new environment as refugees in a world that does not understand their past, nor values their presence.

Berry (1986), a leading Canadian researcher on refugees, states

Refugees represent a special category of persons undergoing acculturation; unlike immigrants, there is often very little voluntary or choice behavior involved; and unlike indigenous or Native persons, there is no established territory or ongoing culture to support the individual . . . refugees may experience more challenges to their mental health than any other person undergoing acculturation. (p. 25)

Their status as refugees and a horrific past that Liberian newcomers calls for understanding and support.

The initial section of this Chapter discusses several important issues related to immigration and refugees. It begins by placing contemporary U. S. immigration within its historical context and examines the evolution of refugee status as it has changed in

response to the political and cultural changes in the world. Next the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, an organization charged with the protection and governance of refugee affairs, and a global survey of refugees is presented. The second section presents background information on Liberia, its history, language, geography, educational, and economic characteristics. Finally, the issue of mental health with respect to refugees and especially Liberian women and children refugees is addressed. An ecological model is used throughout this analysis of the scholarly literature.

### **Refugees: An Overview**

#### ***Historical View of Immigration to the United States***

Historically, Africans arrived to the United States (the New World) as explorers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Africans arrived as indentured servants with the Jamestown colony and several were able to become free African colonists, however this freedom was short lived as the transatlantic slave trade took root and enslaved these African Americans. The slave trade would continue for at least the next two hundred years significantly changing and defining the freedoms of these African descendants (<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/alt/african2.html>).

The *Immigration Act of 1882* launched the beginning of legislative policies that would be increasingly selective as to who was allowed entry to the United States. Those policies usually centered on refusing entry to newcomers who might become a financial burden to the economy. The *Chinese Exclusion Act* was enacted in the same year. This xenophobic policy was in force for ten years, and set the stage for future principles and policies exemplified in the *Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924*. Both overtly and covertly

discriminated against people of color, non-Christians and non-English speakers by the establishment of national quotas (Balgopal, 2000).

Tete (2005) and Potocky-Tripodi (2002) assert that it was not until after the Second World War that refugee status entered the realm of public policy with the enactment of the *Displaced Persons Act of 1948*. This represented a real change in ideology that was elicited by charitable concern for the large numbers of refugees in European displaced person camps. Humanitarian sentiments aside, the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952* maintained previous quotas that privileged the entry of western and northern Europeans; the assumption was that such groups would assimilate better. This reflected a philosophy based in the eugenics movement that deemed fair skinned people of European descent to be racially superior and considered them ideal immigrants who would easily assimilate into American society. Consistent with the United States' political stance against the spread of world communism, the *Refugee Relief Act of 1953* sought to allow the special entry of refugees from Communist countries, by-passing the quota system.

Following the Vietnam War more than 400,000 Southeast Asians immigrated to the United States between 1975 and 1980 (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). This influx of refugees created a need for further immigration reform leading to the *Refugee Act of 1980*. This sweeping legislation brought significant changes to US immigration policy including the redefinition of the term "refugee" to correspond with existing international definitions. This law produced a new classification that did not restrict refugees to previous immigration quotas and that clearly defined the difference between a refugee

and an asylee. In addition, time limited governmental support programs were designed to assist refugees with financial, medical, job placement and case management services in order to encourage the refugee to achieve self sufficiency (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002).

### ***Definition of Refugee Status***

During the late 1940's when the United States was enacting its first refugee policies (the *Displaced Persons Act of 1948*), the United Nations established the United Nations Commission for Refugees (UNCHR) (UNCHR, 2000). The guiding principle of this global organization was to provide "a formal structure for responding to the needs of refugees and standards for the protection of refugees under international law" (UNCHR, 2000, p. 2). In 1951, to specifically address the needs of refugees in Europe, the UN Refugee Convention (through UNHCR) created the first definition of a refugee:

any person who, owing to well-founded fear of persecution by reason of race, religion, nationality, membership, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence...is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it . . . UN Convention 1951 Art. 1[2]. (UNHCR, 2000, p. 23)

Article 1 provided that this definition only applied to individuals who became refugees prior to January 1, 1951. This was changed in 1967 with the amendment of Article 1[2]. Subsequent changes, which pertained specifically to Africa and which were adopted in 1969 with the Organization of African Unity (OAU), call attention to the limitations of the original interpretation as constricting and not inclusive to "situations where people flee to escape the ravages of war and where flagrant violations of human

rights are part of everyday life” (Kibreab, 1987, p. 7). The circumstance of fleeing a war torn country applies to many African refugees. To respond to the specific situation of these refugees, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) approved an expanded definition of a refugee to include

every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part of or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality. . . (OAU Convention on Refugees 1969, Art. 1[2]). (UNHCR, 2000, p. 55)

Additionally, in keeping with traditional African cultural traditions of valuing community over individual autonomy, this updated version asserted that “a refugee had a responsibility to discharge kinship duties and to maintain family unity if at all possible. Thus, all family members, whether together or separated, should share in a refugee’s valid status on a prima facie basis” (Whittaker, 2006, p.7) and that the goal would be to reunite the family if they became separated.

### ***Role of the UNHCR***

As refugees flee their country of origin due to war, their safety and well-being become the charge of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This agency, twice awarded the Noble Peace Prize, must ensure protection for refugees and provide long-range solutions to resolve their precarious condition. While in refugee camps, the UNHCR must assess the level of support and stability that states provide for refugees within their political borders. Additionally, the UNHCR is responsible for supporting and assessing states’ observance of the Convention on Refugee Problems and

providing sufficient aid to protect refugees in their countries (UNHCR, 2000; Loescher & Loescher, 1994). The latter task can require walking a political tight-rope, as the UNHCR may need to question the states' role in contributing to or exacerbating the refugee crisis. Ethnic cleansing and tribal conflicts threaten the protection of human rights and further lead to increasing numbers of refugees. Sadako Ogata, former High Commissioner from 1990-2000, observes "History has shown that displacement is not only a consequence of conflicts; it can also cause conflict. Without human security, there can be no peace and stability" (UNHCR, 2000, p. xi).

Headquartered in Geneva and reporting to the UN General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council, the High Commissioner must remain politically neutral and is usually from a formally neutral country (Whittaker, 2006). Elected in June 2005, the current High Commissioner, Mr. Antonio Guterres, was the former Portuguese prime minister. He oversees a staff of 6,500 who are placed in over 100 countries, supporting 20.8 million refugees, with an annual budget of more than one billion dollars (<http://www.unhcr.org/adm>).

The UNHCR has three alternatives in providing for permanency, safety and the self sufficiency of refugees. A permanency plan referred to as "durable solutions" allows either voluntary repatriation to their homeland, local assimilation into the country of asylum, or resettlement in a third country that is willing to accept them under refugee status. While a philosophy of voluntary repatriation is hopeful and desirable for many Africans who are emotionally tied to their homeland, it is not always a realistic and viable option for many refugees, as the complexities of war and poverty add to the instability of

the homeland of many refugees. Tete (2005) contends that this plan was unsuccessfully implemented with Liberian refugees in Ghana stating “it was not well-planned and the proper groundwork was not done to ensure refugee safety” (p. 9). Coupled with a poor foundation and another outbreak of war in 2002, the Gomoa-Budumburam refugee camp in Ghana actually saw an increase of refugees rather than a decrease. Repatriation is often a complex moral dilemma for the UNHCR as they must negotiate and try to predict the current and future levels of safety for refugees and peacekeeping. If repatriation to one’s homeland is not a viable option then assimilation into the neighboring country of asylum may be an alternative.

Although the durable solution of integration into the first country of asylum, usually a neighboring country, has its strengths when there are similar culture, language and religious customs, it also has its limitations. With the initial influx of refugees, the country of asylum may initially be able to integrate refugees into their population and these refugees may be able to support themselves through menial labor or through trading. However, when the numbers of refugees increase, resources become limited and refugees are not as welcome as they were originally. Furthermore, other stressors potentially associated with integration can result in conflict and violence in the country of asylum; therefore causing refugees to flee once again. Many African refugees experience continued crisis in multiple countries, as war “spills over” into their host country and forces them to escape to a third country for safety. The Liberian war is an example of how war-torn countries can negatively impact vulnerable neighboring countries. In



neighboring Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast rebel Liberian groups created complex economic and political forces within and between neighboring countries.

The last durable alternative, resettlement in a third country, has some of the greatest cultural and geographical challenges for African refugees since many of the host countries may be European or North American. Many Liberians have come to the United States since 2002. Prior to being resettled and immigrating to the US or Europe, many families have been in a “place of limbo” experiencing instability and uncertainty about their future. With a new status as “refugee” comes the realization that they will need to adapt to a new language and culture and the harsh reality that they will probably never see their homeland again. According to the Cultural Orientation Resource Center (2007), the admissions ceiling for African refugees in the United States is 22,000. As of September 30, 2007 there were 17,482 African refugees admitted to the U. S. with 1,606 of this number originating from Liberia for the fiscal year. This group is the third largest African refugee group, following Somalia whose numbers totaled 6,969 and Burundi at 4,545 (<http://www.cal.org/co/refugee/statistics/index.html#africa>).

### ***Worldwide Perspective on Refugees***

It is paramount that we understand the global trends, specifically in relation to refugees, as a way to begin to deconstruct the policies that contribute to the definitions, decision making, and assistance to persons who have had to flee their country. The country from which refugees originate directly relates to the lack of peace and stability in that part of the world. Political and economic crisis may precipitate flight in search of safety and refuge. Therefore, the incidence of refugees waxes and wanes with the

political environment and responses to various disasters. In *2006 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internationally Displaced and Stateless Persons*, the UNHCR (June 2007) declared that “at the end of 2005, the global figure of persons of concern [refugee, asylum-seekers, returnees, internationally displaced and stateless persons] stood at 21 million. By the close of 2006, 32.9 million, or an increase of 56 percent was the figure” (p. 4). For refugees specifically, this population had decreased since 2002; however, the numbers began to rise with the UNHCR report stating that “by the end of 2006, the figure stood at 9.9 million, the highest in five years. As compared with the figure of 8.7 million at the beginning of the year, there had been a net increase of some 1.2 million refugees, or 14 per cent” (p. 5). The UNHCR attributes this increase partly to the increase of refugees due to the war in Iraq, as well as, to changes in the methodology for calculating the active refugee caseload in the United States. This report describes reductions in the number of refugees in “Western and Southern Africa (by 31% and 18% respectively), primarily due to the successful voluntary repatriations to Liberia and Angola respectively” (p. 5).

Marfleet (2006) speaks to the dilemma of accurately counting and categorizing what UNCHR identifies as “persons of concern” stating “the mass displacement is the outcome of a complex of economic, political, environmental and socio-cultural pressures” (p. 14). The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees differentiates between internationally displaced persons (IDP) and refugees in that IDP’s have been forced to flee their homes but have not fled their countries of origin. A refugee refers to specifically to people who are residing outside of their homelands (Potocky-

Tripodi, 2002). Many refugees have been IDPs and vice-versa. This fluctuation causes variation in accounting for the statistics, as people move or are moved (i.e. repatriated) across borders in the attempt to find safety. Marfleet (2006) contends that when one figure decreases for an area, such as the refugee population, the corresponding figure such as the IDP calculation may rise. This waxing and waning may also be economically and/or politically motivated as countries attempt to secure funding for aid and/or paint a picture of peace and stability in their region. Nonetheless, this strategy does not change the fact that the toll on humanity remains constant. It does, however, change the status of a person, such as a refugee, by allowing them legal entry and assistance into a country for permanent resettlement.

## **Liberia**

### ***History of Liberia***

In order to understand the unique character of the participants' narratives, one must have a fundamental knowledge of the history and culture of Liberia. Understanding the historical origins of Liberia and the complexities of its politics and culture assists the observer in interpreting and analyzing the experiences of these women and explaining how this contributes to their world view. In addition to being able to accurately interpret the life stories of these women, the importance of understanding Africa's history, and specifically Liberia's, is tied to our American experience. O'Toole (2007) contends that "to deal with today's global realities, a marriage between the past and the present is needed . . . people must realize that what happens in Africa is linked to what happens to them and vice versa" (p. 54).

Unlike any other African country, Liberia has a distinct history with ties to the United States dating to the early 1800's. Goldberg (1995), in his New York Times column, has described Liberia's unique relationship to the United States by referring to Liberia as "America's stepchild in Africa." In 1820, descendants of kidnapped Africans, freed from slavery, were sent to Liberia and were referred to as Americo Liberian settlers. Many historians contend that these newcomers were sent to Liberia to make a new home for themselves, free from slavery and oppression in the United States. This group was to prepare for the future repatriation of ex-slaves who wanted to return to their African motherland (Nass, 2000; O'Toole, 2007). However, Moran (2006) draws upon statements from Liberian academicians who contend that these newcomers were not sent to Liberia for freedom "as a solution to the problem of slavery" but as "a solution to the problem of free people of color" (p. 53). She contends that many white Americans felt uncomfortable living among free blacks in the United States. This sentiment was held by both former slave owners as well as some abolitionists who held that slavery was immoral but were uneasy about the integration of free Blacks into society. This alternative philosophy challenges historians to debunk notions that Liberia was founded out of humanitarian and philanthropic motives and affirms racism as a significant factor in the founding of this newly established colony. In addition to the racial and political forces surrounding the emigration of settlers to Liberia, there were also religious agendas operating, as Protestant Christians sought to evangelize the indigenous Africans.

In the mid 1800's approximately 12,000 to 16,000 repatriated Africans and their descendants came to Liberia (Ellis, 1999; Fraenkel, 1964; Moran, 2006). Some of these

individuals had been born free and educated in the United States however; nearly half of these new settlers had been emancipated under the stipulation that they would leave the United States for Liberia. These individuals were largely illiterate and had no formal training outside of their work as slaves (Fraenkel, 1964). In addition to the freed slaves from America, Liberian immigrants were constituted of individuals from the West Indies and enslaved people from other parts of Africa, referred to as “Congoes”, who were “freed” by ship captains as they made their way to Liberia (Dunn & Holsoe, 1985; Ellis, 1999).

These newcomers to Liberia, named after the Latin word, *liber* meaning “free” (Dunn & Holsoe, 1985) settled in the Malakette Coastal region of what is referred to as the Grain Coast of West Africa, currently the geographical area of Liberia. The initial group settled in Christopolis, “City of Christ,” later renamed Monrovia after the sitting United States President, James Monroe (Nass, 2000). Having been second-class citizens in the United States, with limited opportunities and rights, these newcomers took a privileged role in Liberian society and government and later became Liberia’s founding fathers and rulers. Fraenkel (1964) speaks to the ambivalence that the new settlers felt towards Africa. Despite their marginalized status in the United States, they related more closely to America than to Africa and did not always celebrate being sent to an Africa they considered “uncivilized.” Fraenkel (1964) believes this exemplifies a “refugee rather than a colonist” (p. 8). As a result, in citing Karnga, Fraenkel (1964) believes that Liberia experienced the creation of distinct social groups. There were four groups: “the official class (including the big traders), the common people, the Congoes, and the natives” (p.

7). Within this hierarchy, the settlers sought to distinguish themselves from the indigenous people of Liberia who they considered beneath them. Although skin color was only one distinction, it also served to further divide the classes as many of the individuals in positions of power had some white ancestors as the offspring of white plantation owners and their slaves (Fraenkel, 1964).

The acquisition of land by the settlers from the indigenous African leaders, who led at least seventeen various ethnic tribal groups, was not always honest, forthright, or fair. There were struggles over property, taxation and leadership with the resettled newcomers setting up their own systems which often conflicted and took advantage of the native tribal cultures. The Twin Battle of 1822, the Port Cresson attack in 1834, the Grebo war of 1875, the Kru war of 1915, the Gola war of 1918 are all examples of the strife that occurred between these two groups as Liberia was integrated by new people (Nass, 2000).

The colony was initially run by wealthy, white administrators from the American Colonization Society. Several colonies in Liberia were named after states in America, such as, Maryland, Virginia and Mississippi that were instrumental in organizing the resettlement of ex-slaves (Nass, 2000). As the colony became more self-sufficient, the colonists were given more control and autonomy. In 1839, the colony was named the Commonwealth of Liberia and in 1841, Joseph Jenkins Roberts was elected the first black governor. In 1847, Roberts proclaimed Liberia a free Republic, becoming Liberia's first President and crafting a Constitution that closely resembled the U. S. Constitution. The caption on the state symbol reads "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here." Having

been born, raised, and educated in the United States, and immigrating to Liberia as an adult, Roberts wanted Liberia to emulate the United States' government's policies and practices (Dunn & Hosoe, 1985). Despite deep ties to the United States, however, Liberia did not receive any financial support from the United States, and the United States government did not formally recognize Liberia until 1862.

In 1870, the True Whig political party was created and governance was controlled by the Americo Liberians. The True Whig party alleged that the previous ruling party, the Republicans, had enacted a class and caste system which discriminated against both dark skinned and indigenous Liberians and against members of specific occupations such as traders. All of Liberia's leaders in its first 100 years were fair skinned. Nass (2000) contends that the Americo Liberians or Congoes, as they were later referred to, "saw themselves as a distinctly enlightened group in comparison with the Africans that they met on the land, whom they often referred to as heathens and savages" (p. 9). With the True Whig party in governance, the Americo Liberians continued to be heads of state from 1877 until 1980. Jackson and Rosberg (1982) assert that through this leadership that

the community had all the earmarks of an 'aristocracy': it was an establishment of not only privileged but also 'superior' self-regarding families whose power and wealth derived directly from the control of government; its dominant standing was supported by a system of laws and rules that sustained its power and privileges; and while open to the absorption of some indigenous Liberians into its families, it was hegemonic in relation to other communities. (pp. 112-113)

Although Hilary R. W. Johnson became the first Liberian-born president in 1894, all of Liberia's rulers during this era had connections to the True Whig party and the Masonic Lodges, both places of political power and prestige. In 1920, Charles D. B. King became

president of Liberia and governed the country for ten years with the True Whig party until his resignation in 1930 during a scandal in which its members were accused of using slaves in contract labor to build roads. The use of contracted or forced labor was prevalent during this time period as the government put pressure on the tribal kings to provide manpower as “modern slavery” to provide economic development through government construction projects. If tribal kings failed to comply, villages would be leveled (Nass, 2000). During this Era, the indigenous people of Liberia were treated as second class citizens. There were also power struggles in regards to boundaries and land appropriations with tribal groups. It was not until 1946 that the indigenous people of Liberia were granted suffrage and their human rights began to improve (Dunn & Holsoe, 1985).

In addition to the disparity among Liberians, the country suffered economic hardships and was financially impoverished until 1926 with the establishment of the Firestone rubber plantation which was the first major foreign investment for Liberia. This business agreement allowed for the 99-year lease of Liberian land by Firestone in exchange for a five million dollar loan from Firestone which was brokered through the U. S. State Department. This economic relief later contributed to the minimal development of public services and resources such as electricity, water and schooling in the 1940's for the rural regions of Liberia. However, this financial boost also came with a cost in human rights violations as the need for workers in the Firestone plantation caused the government to pressure tribal chiefs to ‘draft’ the indigenous people as laborers in order to meet the labor demands of Firestone (Ellis, 1999, p. 45).



The political culture in the 1940's began to change as a result of financial security coming with the Firestone development. The Liberian elite, which had previously had career ties to professions such as farming and trading, now valued governmental work as more prestigious, cultured and "civilized." This distinction between the "civilized" and "uncivilized" classification was based on one's social and economic position in Liberian social hierarchy, with the more "civilized" people having more power, authority and resource in the government (Fraenkel, 1964). In order to keep power and control over trading, the elite groups encouraged "foreigners, whether Europeans, Americans, Lebanese, or Mandingo traders, since non-nationals were less likely than Liberian citizens to use their commercial positions to build political constituencies" (Ellis, 1999, p. 45) to engage in this economy.

During his lengthy tenure as president from 1944 to 1971, William Tubman continued the practice of maintaining high level governmental jobs for the elite Americo Liberians; however he did begin to integrate many indigenous Liberians into lower level civil service jobs. Tubman, born in Liberia to parents who emigrated from the United States, had ties to the Grebo tribe and embraced the indigenous population. No previous ruler had reached out even in a limited way to tribal groups outside of the oligarchic rule of the Americo Liberians (Nass, 2000). At this time Liberia and other African countries began experiencing rapid growth and development stemming from new ideologies that emerged throughout Africa as a result of independence, decolonization and Western educated African intellectuals. This transformation required a reevaluation of political and economic policies.

The tradition of incorporating indigenous Liberians into government occupations, (albeit at low levels) continued with Tubman's successor, William R. Tolbert, Jr., who took office after serving as Vice-President in the Tubman government. With Tolbert's appointment, native Liberians were promoted to higher levels within the government, despite resistance from Americo Liberians. Other changes initiated with the Tolbert administration centered on changing the official attire from Western dress to tribal clothing which Tolbert donned, on promises to end corruption, and on the development of the youth. Tolbert may have adopted some of these changes since he was born in Bensonville and grew up speaking Kpelle and Bassa; he was the first ruler to speak an indigenous language (Nass, 2000). But despite his initial good intentions, Tolbert's administration was characterized by nepotism, greed, and tolerance of inequities. Young Liberian intellectuals—the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) and the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) began to challenge Tolbert's political and economic policies. These groups called for the resignation of Tolbert and led protests addressing economic injustices, most notably the Rice Riots of 1979. In this demonstration, protestors marched against the increase in the price of rice, the staple product of the Liberian diet, and were fired upon by government soldiers; hundreds were imprisoned and there was mass looting by soldiers (Ellis, 1999; Moran, 2006; Nass, 2000). This instability coupled with the withdrawal of support by the United States eventually led to the bloody overthrow of Tolbert's government in 1980 by Samuel Doe, a Krahn tribesman. This revolution ended the long term rule by Americo Liberians.

The coup d'état by Doe was military in nature but was supported by the local people of Liberia, most especially the student leadership groups. Initially, students and indigenous Liberians perceived this change as liberating, creating economic and social justice after many years of rule by Americo Liberians who took control of the majority of government positions and acquired wealth through nepotism and corruption. However, despite the need for new leadership, the overthrow was violent and excessive. The February 1992 Issue of *US Committee for Refugees* describes the coup that placed Doe in command as brutal, leading to the murder of Tolbert and 27 members of his security guard; moreover, "more than 200 other people were killed during the 3 days following the coup. A week later, 13 other top government officials were executed in Monrovia. Their execution was shown on Liberian television" (p. 4). Many of Tolbert's administrators who were killed were his relatives. Doe's practice of cleaning house was not embraced among other African countries, most notably, the Ivory Coast, as these countries either had kinship relations with the Tolbert administrators and/or they saw this practice as excessive and brutal. The Doe administration also began to acquire property from Tolbert's administration and Americo Liberians; eventually greed and corruption became ascendant in Doe's organization. What was initially viewed as positive democratic social change by the people quickly changed as the educated supporters of Doe's movement were disenfranchised by his brutal tactics and his lack of vision for the country (Huband, 2001). Nass (2000) observed that "gradually, the populist democratic rhetoric gave way to fascist law and order, and nationalism gave way to ethnicity and military repression" (p. 49).

During his nine years of rule, Doe became increasingly controlling and paranoid. His military regularly would imprison and beat students and intellectuals who he viewed as challenging his ideology. Huband (2001) in his book, *The Skull Beneath the Skin: Africa after the Cold War*, writes of witnessing the aftermath of the ghastly killing of civilians, many of them women and children, at Saint Peter's church. Doe's army, the AFL, was known to have murdered dissenters at the beach outside of Monrovia. Many educated Liberians left the country during this time for protection, most notably, Ellen Johson-Sirleaf, later to become president of Liberia. Newspapers and media were also tightly controlled and elections were rigged (Ellis, 1999; Moran, 2006; Nass, 2000). Moran (2006) asserts that there were ritual killings in villages by "heartmen" who supposedly ate the hearts of innocent children as a way to manipulate and control rural Liberians by threatening witchcraft. Moran (2006) contends that "ritual murder is recognized as both a horrendous and a pragmatic response to the structures of exclusion confronted by political aspirants in the 1970s and '80s and today" (p. 119). Doe believed in juju or magical and spiritual powers and "claimed to have had a direct warning from God" (Ellis, 1999, p. 25) as protection against the multiple coups that were attempted during his rule.

Despite the internal and regional resistance against his rule, Doe continued to receive economic support and endorsement from the United States as he supported U.S. policies abroad. Nass (2000) contends that the "United States economic and military assistance to Liberia during Doe's regime increased astronomically over the years" (p. 58). This economic support and military training, which he obtained from Israel, helped

to fuel Doe's army which was made up largely of Krahn tribesman (Ellis, 1999; Nass, 2000). Ellis (1999) and Huband (2001) assert that the United States had the power to remove Doe from leadership but choose not to intervene because "Liberia was the main seat of U.S. power in West Africa and the site of an important satellite-tracking facility and a major CIA station" (Ellis, 1999, p. 64). Huband (2001) contends that the United States intentionally turned a blind eye to the corruption and viciousness of Doe's administration because of its own need to control and manipulate Liberia. US policy aimed to continue Liberia's relationship as a US ally in the Cold War as well as to prevent any potential alliances with Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, who was courting vulnerable African countries. Doe was able to maintain US support because his rhetoric was politically correct. The United States in turn was able to control Doe by catering to his desire for wealth. A reported \$500 million dollars was paid to the Liberian government by United States funds during Doe's tenure (Huband, 2001, p. 68).

The AFL, Doe's army, was largely comprised of his tribesman, the Krahn. Originally, the Gio tribal group was in allegiance with the Krahn tribal group because of the unique relationship between Doe and Thomas Quiwonkpa, one of Doe's military leaders and an architect of the Tolbert overthrow. However, this relationship dissolved in an unsuccessful coup attempt by Quiwonkpa in 1985. Subsequently, the Gio, Quiwonkpa's tribal affiliation, and Mano, a neighboring tribe, were targeted by Doe. New York Times columnist Kenneth Noble (1990) recounts a speech in 1990 by President Doe to incite the Krahn tribesmen to kill other tribesmen by stating that they needed to "get their cutlasses, their single barreled guns and get in the bush" to fight the

rebel factions. Noble (1990) quotes an anonymous citizen as interpreting this as a “license to kill.” Along with the Krahn tribesman, the Mandingo were recruited by Doe and given special economic privileges. This practice alienated the Mandingo from their countrymen. Previously, they had been viewed as outsiders and foreigners by many Liberians. Tribalism continued to be a major factor in the Liberian strife and civil war as rebel groups, warlords and rulers pitted tribal groups against one another for power and control of territories. Despite previous class differences, the phenomenon of tribalism was new in Liberia. Ellis (1999) cites Gifford’s quote of Blaine Harden as stating that “Before Doe, Liberia was one of the few African countries without serious tribal hostility” (p. 65). As tribalism increased so did the brutal violence in Liberia. After Quiwonkpa’s failed coup, he was callously “captured, tortured, castrated, dismembered” (Huband, 2001, p.67) before being murdered. His body was then paraded around the city and it was reported that Doe’s army ate parts of Quiwonkpa’s body in accordance with ritual beliefs that ingesting your enemy will give strength and power (Ellis, 1999). Quiwonkpa was not the only casualty of this uprising as Huband (2001) asserts that eyewitnesses report that as many as 3,000 civilians were murdered for their support of Quiwonkpa.

Another former member of the Doe regime, Charles Taylor, who had served as deputy commerce minister and head of the General Services Agency (GSA), began to organize a rebel group called the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) as a result of Doe’s oppression of the Gio and Mano indigenous people. Prior to this organization, Taylor had fled to the United States in 1983, was jailed in Massachusetts and was held

for extradition having embezzled \$900,000 of Liberia's treasury. There are varying accounts as to whether Taylor escaped from jail, was assisted by the CIA, or was released after bribing himself out of jail (Ellis, 1999; Huband, 2001). However, after his escape Taylor made several trips to various African countries. Eventually, he was imprisoned in Ghana. At this point, Taylor began to formulate a plan to overthrow Doe's regime. His coup was prepared in collaboration with leaders in Burkina Faso and in Libya with Muammar Gaddafi. He also organized a group of militants in Ivory Coast (Ellis, 1999; Huband, 2001). Taylor also had formed an alliance with Foday Sankoh, the future rebel leader of Sierra Leone, when he was training in Libya. Concurrently, a Gio tribesman, Prince Johnson, a rebel leader of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) was also forming rebel troops to take over Doe's government. Initially, Taylor and Johnson collaborated but eventually split off into different factions.

In 1990, Monrovia, the capital of Liberia came under fire from the INPFL and the NPFL as they fought against Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). Liberian civilians who were unable to escape from the city were caught in the conflict. There was disorder, mayhem, and violence in the streets of Monrovia as control of the government was nonexistent and because there were no non-governmental organizations (NGOs) present to assist the citizens (Nass, 2000). Due to the conflict and instability, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with military delegates from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Mali, Togo and Guinea decided to send a newly formed Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to Liberia. ECOMOG was charged with reducing conflict in the region and encouraging Doe to

leave the country. Nigeria assumed leadership of the group (Nass, 2000). There are differing opinions as to whether ECOMOG was ill-prepared and/or cooperated with a number of groups (i.e. INPFL and NPFL) and countries (i.e. United States, Nigeria) in failing to maintain security within Monrovia in early September. Ellis (1999) describes that on the evening of September 9, 1990, the INPFL captured Doe after gunfight broke out at the ECOMOG headquarters. Doe was taken hostage, brought to the INPFL headquarters where his brutal killing was videotaped by the Palestine Liberation Organization news crew who had been covering the events of the coup. The Palestine Liberation Organization had an interest in the events, since Doe had been a supporter of Israel, as a result of his previous positive relationship with the U. S. Ellis (1999) observes that it is unclear whether Doe was lured to the ECOMOG headquarters or left on his own accord; at any rate, however, this action left him at the mercy of his enemies.

Ellis (1999) and Nass (2000) describe the brutal assassination of Samuel Doe. Doe had his fingers, genitalia and both of his ears cut off- one ear was allegedly eaten by Johnson, and Doe was later shot to death. This torture was recorded on video and dispersed throughout Liberia and West Africa. Doe's dead body was then placed on display so that Liberians could witness his death. He was later disposed of in the sea so that his remains did not reside on Liberian land. Ellis (1999) contends that part of this violent display is tied to cultural beliefs. He states

such apparently bizarre events as the filming of Samuel Doe's death by people who believed in the President's ability to cause part of his being to fly like a bird by the use of esoteric powers are perfectly comprehensible to the very many Liberians who assume that the invisible world exists and is a major resource in daily life. (p. 16)



In spite of his initial leadership in the overthrow of the Doe government and his hopes to become president, Prince Johnson's (INPFL) leadership was short lived as he withdrew his primary interest as president. At this point, Nigeria, the ECOMOG leader, was not supportive of either Johnson or Taylor. Johnson was viewed as unpredictable after his brutal murder of Doe, and Taylor was not trusted by either Nigeria or the United States due to his ties to Libya. Taylor was incensed that he was unable to celebrate his victory because of resistance from ECOMOG who had forced his troops out of Monrovia (Ellis, 1999). Thousands of civilians were killed by the NPFL at "check-points" to bordering countries as they attempted to flee to neighboring countries for refuge. Some civilians who were from either Gio or Mano tribes were not targeted as they had one time been supporters of the NPFL (Ellis, 1999). At this point Taylor had control over most of Liberia outside of Monrovia and his power began to spread into Sierra Leone with whom he was bitter because of its support for ECOMOG. While control over Liberia waxed and waned between ECOMOG, the NPFL and the INFPL, Dr. Amos Sawyer, a United States educated professor, was interim President with primary support of Nigeria through ECOMOG (Ellis, 1999).

By 1992, a newly emerging rebel group was formed; the United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO) which was comprised of the Liberian Peoples Defense Force and the Movement for the Survival of Liberian Moslems. Both of these groups were anti NPFL forces that had been exiled to neighboring countries (Nass, 2000). Ellis (1999) contends that

the longer the war lasted, the more factions appeared, as older groupings reformed and as existing one developed splits. This spirit of factionalism, deeply embedded in Liberia's political history, was aggravated by ECOMOG's tendency to engineer or manipulate such factions for its own purposes. (p. 104)

Morehead (2005) asserts that the Nigerian led ECOMOG did not serve as a protector of democracy and peace but "plundered at will, providing arms to those warlords most open to their deals" (p. 167). Despite the fact that multiple groups were opposing Taylor's rebels, or that there was a signed cease fire in July 1993 by the NPFL, ULIMO and INPFL, fighting continued and the NPFL was able to overthrow ECOMOG in October 1993 and took over Monrovia. This control was orchestrated by Taylor and his troops, "20,000 out of the country's 75,000 fighters [who] were [reportedly] children" who were coerced and drugged (Moorehead, 2005, p. 167). Taylor was able to fund his army by trading in diamonds, now referred to as blood diamonds, timber, rubber, gold, and iron ore to obtain firearms.

By 1995 Charles Taylor had taken control over Monrovia and situated himself in a position of power. Taylor's rebel forces actually shared some unique relationships with ULIMO and ECOMOG during this time period. In 1997, elections were held and Taylor won by three-quarters of the vote as he boasted that he was "destined by God" to be president (Ellis, 1999). Although Liberians attributed much of the violence and hardship during the long civil war to Taylor they supported him by resigning themselves to the understanding that "a vote for Taylor was the best hope for peace, since they knew that if Taylor did not win the election, he was likely to re-start the war" (Ellis, 1999, p. 109). A popular song during this campaign was "He (Taylor) killed my Pa, He killed my Ma, I'll

vote for him.” Moorehead (2005) reports that by 1997 that there were “7 to 8 million firearms in West Africa, transferred from one area to another as conflicts developed” (p. 168). Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast—Liberians’ neighboring countries and places of refuge for many Liberians, all experienced war during this time period as rebel groups and warlords would gain and lose control of borders. Both before and during his presidency, Charles Taylor committed many atrocities against his people and in particular children as he secured them as soldiers in his rebel forces. According to the 2006 National Human Development Report, Liberia returned to war in 1999 in spite of the 1997 elections. Taylor continued to trade arms with Sierra Leone for diamonds to fund both countries’ armies. In June 2003, a United Nations justice tribunal charged him with war crimes and the war ended in August 2003 with the Accra Comprehensive Peace Accord. Taylor later fled to Nigeria and at the time of this writing is awaiting trial in The Hague (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2006/>).

Since Charles Taylor’s rule ended in 2003, two more presidents and an interim president were elected. The current president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, is the first woman president of an African country. Under her leadership she has strived to reorganize Liberia by attending to basic human needs such as food, shelter, and safety in a country that is still experiencing severe economic destruction, lack of infrastructure and trauma from being at war.

As a result of the civil unrest dating back to the 1980s, extending to the bloody coup and uprising of 1990, hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed as people were caught in warring government and guerrilla militia fighting that represented various tribal

factions. Prior to Doe's leadership, there was minimal tribal hostility. Scholars vary on whether this war was fueled by tribalism or as Moran (2006) contends, was more "conflict *within* than *between* ethnic categories" (p. 4). However, what is evident is that following the assassination of Doe and the war that ensued, there was an exodus of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugees from Liberia into the West African neighboring countries most notably, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria. Moorehead (2005) states "in a single year, 700,000 [Liberians] left the country, for the most part taking little or nothing with them" (p. 168). The 2006 National Human Development Report indicates that during the civil war "close to a million people fled to neighboring countries and between 1989 and mid 2003 . . . more than 270,000 people died as a result of the conflict" (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2006/>).

Despite the corrupt and limited intervention of ECOMOG, and later the limited aid offered by the United Nations to meet Liberia's overwhelming need, the Liberian crisis was not addressed in a timely manner and most especially not by the United States, a country with deep historical ties to Liberia. Whether it was a conscious effort to avoid engagement in peace making interventions (Huband, 2001) or as Moorehead (2005) questions whether the first Gulf War contributed to America's inattentiveness; it is evident that the United States failed in its humanitarian efforts to the expense of Liberian's innocent civilians whose ancestry is tied to America.

The stories told by my participants center on the chaos and despair that pervaded their lives as a result of the war and on the abuse of power and the life changing events that have forever impacted their lives.

### ***Geographical and Linguistic Characteristics of Liberia***

Located on the west coast of Africa, Liberia is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean on its southwest side, and Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast to its northwest, east, and southeast, respectively (Dunn & Holsoe, 1985) (see maps in Appendix B). Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia are known as the three Mano River Union countries of West Africa and according to Moorehead (2005), “they all vie for the title of the world’s poorest and least settled countries” (p. 158). According to the 2004 Population Reference Bureau, the population of Liberia consisted of 3.5 million people. Three percent of this population is Americo-Liberians and 97% of the population is indigenous. This native group is comprised of between sixteen to eighteen indigenous ethno-linguistic groups or official tribes: Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Grebo, Mano, Krahn, Gola, Gbandi, Loma, Kissi, Vai, Bella, Dei, Gbe, Mende, Sapo and Mandingo with the Kpelle and Bassa comprising the largest ethnic groups (Kollehlon, Russ, Ngovo, & Dunn-Marcos, 2005; Moorehead, 2005; Moran, 2006). Although the official language of Liberia is English, many Liberians speak their tribal language and/or Liberian Pidgin English. The linguistic groups are subdivided into four ethnic cluster groups—the Kwa, the Mande-Fu, the Mande-Tan and the Mel or West Atlantic with each cluster group comprised of multiple tribal affiliations (Kollehlon et al., 2005). Tribal languages are geographically located within Liberia and neighboring countries. Many of these tribal groups have similarities and ethnic ties to

other West African countries. The Mandingo, Krahn and Gio have connections to tribal groups in Ivory Coast; the Mende and Vai are found in Sierra Leone; and the Kissi, Kpelle, and Loma have affiliations in Guinea. These connections assisted some refugees as they fled to these neighboring countries for refuge. Refugees, who were displaced several times in multiple countries, have suffered stress and discrimination as they needed to learn new languages and culture after each transition. Additionally, as many refugees moved within Liberia, as internally displaced people (IDPs), they too may have undergone these negative experiences. My interviews represented a diverse group of Liberian women, with the Mandingo tribe having the largest representation (three participants).

### ***Liberian Education, Economy, and Employment***

Historically, education was relegated to select Americo-Liberians who had arrived in Liberia having been educated in the United States. Some indigenous citizens had their own traditional educational systems such as Sande and Poro secret societies that were tied to their ethnic communities. Dunn and Holsoe (1985) assert that “between 1822 and 1839 there existed only elementary schools run by Christian churches and private individual or institutions” (p. 65). In the 1830’s and 1840’s Baptist, Episcopal, Catholic, and Presbyterian missions were formed in Liberia, with several of them offering educational opportunities (Sanneh, 1983). Through their mission, religious institutions provided educational and health assistance and resources. The Catholic Church, under-represented in Liberia until the 1970’s (Hastings, 1979), was instrumental in setting up schooling for many Liberians. Gifford (1993) reports that even Muslims participated in

those educational opportunities since these schools were renowned for their excellent instruction. Similarly, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, understanding the desperate need for health programs in Liberia, began to work in the community by setting up clinics, dispensing medication and caring for the sick. Their work reflected the healing powers that they professed in the word of God (Gifford, 1993). These hands-on professions—education and health care—attended to the desperate needs of the common people by improving their living conditions and providing social support. Additionally, the Churches and religious institutions were a source of hope for many young Liberians who were looking for an occupation and opportunities to develop leadership skills. Many aspiring youth were able to become pastors as the churches did not require them to obtain formalized religious education. Gifford (1993) asserts that “to establish and pastor a church brought not only a livelihood, but status, influence and responsibility” (p. 289).

It was not until the 1880’s that the government initiated formalized public schooling. Despite the increase in availability of education, its quality was often lacking as there was only limited governmental support and resources. Liberians who resided in Monrovia had many more educational opportunities than citizens in the rural communities (Schmidt, 2005). Inadequate governmental economic resources coupled with individual poverty prevented many Liberians from obtaining an education beyond primary level schooling. There were, however, a few elite Liberians who were able to obtain higher education outside of Liberia with many of them educated in the United States. Although a small group, these newly educated citizens began to change the culture of Liberia as new skills and ideas emerged. Although education was open to both men

and women, women received less schooling than men, especially in rural communities (Dunn & Holsoe, 1985). This practice mirrors many other developing countries in Africa, as women are expected to be in charge of the household and education often competes with domestic roles and responsibilities.

Educational opportunities for many newly arriving refugees has not only been limited, due to previous economic conditions prior to the civil war, but it has also been disrupted as many refugees have experienced many years of interruption in their normal activities as they have had to move among various refugee camps (Schmidt, 2005) . Within refugee camps, educational opportunities have also been very limited as formal schooling has been prohibitive for some and when educational opportunities were available, lessons were taught in the native language of the host country, such as French in Ivory Coast.

Liberia's natural resources are agricultural, and farming traditionally has been the responsibility of women, in addition to housekeeping. The 2006 National Human Development Report on Liberia states that prior to the civil war, "75% of the population lived in rural areas working mainly as subsistence farmers" (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2006/>). The staple crops are rice, cassava, yams, coffee and cocoa, with rice being the mainstay of the Liberian diet. In addition to farming, many women sell their produce at markets. Men from rural communities participate in manual labor in trading, mining, fishing, cutting timber and working in the iron ore and rubber industries. The establishment of Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in the 1920's escalated Liberia's production of rubber, the leading natural resource in



Africa (Dunn & Holsoe, 1985; Moorehead, 2005) and the industry became a source of employment for many Liberians in the rural areas. This industry, despite its monetary benefit to the country, was destructive of human capital as there were allegations of forced labor of indigenous Liberians as a means of supplying this necessary work force, coupled with poor working conditions.

The distinctions between the social classes were perpetuated throughout Liberian society. Fraenkel (1964) describes well-defined differences within Liberia's social hierarchy that are dependent upon education and employment opportunities and which determine social standing and social movement. This dichotomy is referred to as "civilized" and "uncivilized." Fraenkel contends "civilization is a process in which all Monroviaans are involved, and theoretically a person's social position is measurable against a scale of ranking based on varying degrees of civilization" (p. 197). The "civilized" definition, which is tantamount to being "Westernized," describes a Liberian who has been able to obtain an education and who is either employed in a government position or as a professional white collar worker. This ideology or "way of life" is based on Christian and Western values. In contrast, the "uncivilized" Liberians are largely comprised of rural laborers or domestics who have received minimal formal education and who wear native attire. They may refer to their lack of education as "not being a book man or not knowing book." Although an education is desirable, the "mobility for the tribal into the civilized section of the population depends primarily on education" (Fraenkel, 1964, p. 214) that is not easily affordable. Summarizing educational statistics from the year 2000, the 2006 National Human Development Report on Liberia states that

only 40% of the population had access to education with the adult literacy rate of males and females at 50% and 26% respectively

(<http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2006/>). This low level of educational attainment demonstrates the limitations of advancement in social hierarchy within Liberian culture. Some individuals and families have been able to gain an education through the assistance of kinship networks where extended families who have received an education will support the schooling of illiterate family members or their children. This system of valuing kinship care is deeply embedded in African culture.

It is with the understanding of the complexities of culture, poverty, violence, and tribalism (just to name a few factors) that the American social work profession is challenged to meet the extensive needs of Liberian refugees in a culturally competent manner while empowering them to develop their community in a new land. The next section describes an ecological approach in addressing the mental health needs of Liberian refugees while examining the cultural context and specific issues for Liberian women and children.

### **Mental Health and Refugees: An Ecological Approach**

The ecological model, a practical and theoretical framework in social work and public health disciplines, “focuses on the interaction between the person and the environment. The goal of social work practice is to enhance and restore the psychosocial functioning of persons or to change oppressive or destructive social conditions that negatively affect the mutually beneficial interactions between persons and their environment” (Morales & Sheafor, 1995, p. 476). An ecological approach is particularly well suited for work with

refugees and immigrants for two primary reasons; cultural competence is an embedded value of this model; and it avoids a deficit or pathological focus favoring a strengths-based approach. Miller and Rasco (2004) offer six principles of the ecological approach to address mental health issues of refugees:

1) Psychological problems often reflect a poor fit between the demands of people's settings and the adaptive resources to which they have access, 2) Ecological interventions should prioritize and address problems that are of concern to community members, 3) Whenever possible, prevention should be prioritized over treatment, 4) Local values and beliefs about psychological well-being and distress should be incorporated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of community-based interventions, 5) Whenever possible, ecological interventions should be integrated into existing community settings and activities to enhance community participation and long-term sustainability, and 6) Capacity building, rather than direct service provision by mental health professionals, should be an intervention priority . . . and [should] reflect the ecological focus on empowerment. (p. 376)

For these reasons, most social work practitioners agree that an ecological approach is the preferred mental health intervention for clients and it is particularly applicable for intervention with refugees and immigrants.

### ***Mental Health of Liberian Refugees***

There is limited literature on Liberian refugees, most notably is a lack of information on their mental health status. Several factors contribute to this lack of information. First, the itinerant lives of Liberians may be one explanation for the lack of mental health information. Liberians (with or without refugee status) have a history of moving to neighboring countries such as Guinea, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria to join extended family and escape the conflict in their homeland. In addition, Liberians may relocate to different parts of Liberia to flee strife in their immediate

communities. However, in this later case, they are not considered refugees by definition and therefore are not eligible for services afforded under refugee classification.

Nonetheless, Liberians live in a protracted situation where “[they] find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social, and psychological needs remain unfilled after years of exile” (Jamal, 2003, p. 4).

Second, internal country strife in neighboring countries adds to the unpredictability of Liberians’ lives and a lack of information. For example, the Liberian civil war sparked conflicts in neighboring countries such as Sierra Leone. This domestic conflict made it difficult for refugees in Sierra Leone to be well-served. While Sierra Leone’s refugee experience resulted in a number of research projects being conducted with refugees, it is unclear if the researchers differentiated between the experiences of Liberian refugees and other refugees who share West African kinship.

A final explanation for the lack of mental health information on Liberian refugees is their relative recent arrival to the United States. During the initial resettlement phase, newcomer’s immediate needs, such as medical, housing and employment, are the focus. However, after refugee’s initial integration to U. S. culture, research specific information on different refugee groups increase. For example, a great deal of the literature now focuses on the mental health evaluation and acculturation process of Southeast Asians (Cambodians, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Laotians) since this wave of refugees began in the late 1970’s. There is also a fair amount of research on Bosnian, Kosovar, Sudanese, and Somalian refugees’ resettlement process since their arrival in the 1990’s. Much of

this literature, generated by psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health providers, focuses on the assessment and diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to explain problems of adjustment and acculturation after fleeing a war-torn country. Although this information was somewhat beneficial, many practitioners and researchers now agree that this problem-based approach provides a limited understanding of presenting problems may lead to improper solutions. PTSD labels are Western and not culturally bound or practiced in many countries from which refugees migrate. Today, researchers have begun to engage individuals in a family-community model for addressing mental health issues more conducive to their countries of origin.

### ***Cultural Context***

Not surprisingly, Liberian refugees have high levels of distress. These refugees experienced years of personal violence and loss and witnessed their leaders and conflicting tribal factions torture and destroy each other. Nonetheless, violence as it relates to mental health is a culturally bound concept. Violence has been a part of Liberian history before the recent civil war. A *US Committee for Refugees* (February 1992) reports that President Doe took leadership after a brutal coup d'état. The overthrow included the murder of then President Tolbert, 27 members of his security team, and more than 200 civilians. Later, thirteen of Tolbert's top government officials were executed on live Liberian television. In another example of cruelty, author Stephen Ellis (1999) in *The Mask of Anarchy*, recounts the brutal assassination of President Samuel Doe. Both of Doe's ears were cut off and one ear was allegedly eaten by Prince Johnson. Doe was later shot to death. His torture was video recorded and shown in Liberia and

throughout West Africa and later his body was placed on display. Ellis (1999) contends that this demonstration is culturally bound. He states

such apparently bizarre events as the filming of Samuel Doe's death by people who believed in the President's ability to cause part of his being to fly like a bird by the use of esoteric powers are perfectly comprehensible to the very many Liberians who assume that the invisible world exists and is a major resource in daily life. (p. 16)

Many Liberians believe in the powers of juju (African magical powers), secret societies, the use of masks, and the ability of Satan to embody a person. Seeing a dead body validates the experience of death for Liberians. Mutilation, eating human flesh, videotaped executions, and dressing in carnival "costumes" may all appear bizarre and barbaric in Western culture, but should be viewed in a cultural context. Ellis (1999) supports the work of African studies scholar Paul Richards in asserting that this form of violence is no less "civilized" than Western beliefs of "war is war." Westerners who think themselves different validate "... [the] old clichés about the Dark Continent" (p. 20).

Understanding mental health utilizing a culturally appropriate lens allows shifts in paradigms. Miller and Rasco (2004) assert that PTSD needs to be evaluated in a social and cultural context. Studies reviewed address PTSD as an individual symptom and does not take into account the family or community stress. The philosophy of individual wellness is rooted in Western understanding and conflicts with many refugee cultures that value collectiveness. The diagnosis of PTSD is also tied to a medical model that assumes people under stress cannot fully function. Recognizing the limitations of this viewpoint is

valuable too. A new definition that includes an analysis of community trauma is consistent with an ecological approach that more fully accounts for political and cultural context of refugees' experiences.

### ***Specific Issues for Liberian Women and Children***

Researchers and practitioners need to be cognizant of specific issues confronted by Liberian refugee women and children. One issue pertains to education. Only 15% of Liberians are literate ([www.cnn.com/world](http://www.cnn.com/world)). Many Liberian children have limited schooling because of transiency and the limited educational opportunities in refugee camps. Parents have also had little formal education because of more than a decade's strife. Therefore, programs that promote literacy and education should be high priority to ensure self-sufficiency and increase self-esteem. Programs such as the Glenhaven tutorial project in Greensboro, North Carolina meet this need. This community-based program focuses on providing academic assistance, collaboration between school and home, and acculturation.

It is important to recognize the high incidence of personal physical and sexual violence in the lives of Liberian women and children. Perpetrators of this violence include soldiers and people in positions to protect these vulnerable refugees. One study conducted by Swiss et al. (1998) found that 49% of the women surveyed had experienced one act of physical or sexual violence by a soldier. They also found that women under the age of 25 years old were at higher risk for abuse. Much of this abuse may be tied to tribalism and is indicative of the civil conflict in Liberia. The survey found that "being forced to cook for a soldier or fighter was associated with being subjected to his control

in a variety of ways including sexual violence” (p. 628). These domestic acts are considered intimate acts in Liberian culture and it is important for researchers and practitioners to understand their cultural implications.

Even after women and families arrived at refugee camps they continued to be victimized. Perpetrators were in positions of “protector.” Naik (2002) found that not only were women and children sexually abused by men in the local community, but they were also harmed by humanitarian workers who “extorted sex in exchange for desperately needed aid supplies (such as biscuits, soap, medicines, and tarpaulin) and sometimes even withholding them until sex was proffered” (pp. 16-17). Due to the significant poverty in the refugee camps many women and young girls were prostituted as a means of survival where “sex as a trading commodity is a commonly held notion” (p. 18).

Naik (2002) contends that in a society that has experienced such destruction and poverty that “the usual protective social and community structures may have broken down [and] traditional practices and behavior patterns may become distorted especially once these safeguards are lost” (p. 18). The deterioration of support coupled with the stressors of acculturation can produce fear, anxiety, depression, and familial conflict and abuse. Sossou (2006) cites the research of Ugwuegbu and Temowo, who studied Liberian refugees in a refugee camp in Nigeria and found that they “displayed higher rates of neurosis and depression, as well as other forms of physical and mental illness, and other psychological and psychosomatic disorders than the local non-refugee population” (p. 13).



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I define the constructs, terms, and methods of narrative research methodology including research subjectivity. I also describe the participants, procedures for recruitment, interviews, and data analysis.

This chapter introduces the reader to narrative research procedures, an inquiry method in which the interpretations of participants are central. Unlike quantitative methodologies, narrative research gives participants the opportunity to construct, direct, and interpret the meaning of their personal stories. Participation in narrative research does not require the story teller to possess any specialized training or educational proficiency. Casey (1995-1996) asserts the “attribute of oral history is the way in which it can display the assets of those considered to have none” (p. 220). My decision to use a narrative approach was also a political, social, and cultural statement. This methodology honors the values intrinsic to feminist and cultural studies research and is consistent with my feminist research practice.

Casey (1995-1996) contends that narrative research, as an inquiry method, experienced great attention in the 1980’s, and influenced research methodologies in multiple helping professions including medicine, law, education, and social work. She

asserts that what “links together all of these lines of inquiry is an interest in the ways that human beings make meaning through language” (p. 212).

Qualitative research methods recognize and value the commonalities in participants’ stories; narrative research methods describe social groups that have shared beliefs and problems, and use common vocabulary to describe those constructs. Casey (1993) asserts that people speak and think in patterned ways. Researchers and philosophers use different terms to describe this concept. Gramsci (1980) defines it as the “collective subjective,” Bakhtin (1981) describes it as “social dialect,” West (1982) identifies it as “discourse,” and Fish (1980) calls it an “interpretive community.” Individual voices, albeit valuable, are superseded by a powerful collective dialogue. Casey (1995-1996) posits that “In the process of articulating a common political discourse, individual isolation is overcome, and identity is created in community” (p. 222). Regardless of the term, analyzing life histories in the collective sense is central to this study.

### **Narrative Inquiry Methodology**

Narrative research analysis is the process by which I collected and analyzed the life stories of my Liberian women refugees. I choose this methodology because it “allows the individuals to become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their own lives” (Reissman, 1993, p. 2). In addition to being a culturally appropriate methodology for listening to the life stories of Liberian refugee women, this approach empowers its participants in reflecting upon their past struggles and in the creation of hope for their future. Thompson (1978) contends “Oral history gives history back to the

people in their own words. And in giving them a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making” (p. 226). I contend that the practice of recalling and telling one’s story is therapeutic and cathartic as the narrator is able to reflect on their strengths and resiliency. This act of reflection enhances problem solving skills and the process constructs a legacy for future generations.

Since people speak and act in patterned ways (Casey, 1995/1996), the researcher must pay close attention to cultural and political idioms that demonstrate “the way[s] in which human beings make meaning” (Casey, 1993, p. 3). In this chapter I define key terms and give examples of key terminology including intertextuality, selectivity, silence, slippage and the collective subjective which I employed in my analysis. These terms are utilized in the findings and discussion chapters of my dissertation.

Selectivity is revealed from an analysis of those parts of the participants’ stories that were chosen for inclusion by the participants. God-Talk and Kin-Talk were two prominent themes which emerged from an analysis of the life stories of my participants. I contend that these themes of faith and family are expressed in a religious and cultural context specific to Liberians.

Silence is revealed through an analysis of those parts of participants’ stories that have been omitted. Silence may be used to deal with those areas too painful to reveal and to avoid other personal scars.

Silence is noted in these narratives in regards to not addressing any economic hardships in their life in Liberia. Economic hardships were only addressed as they spoke of their lives in the refugee camps.

Although the life stories of my Liberian refugee women (both Christian and Muslim) spoke strongly of their faith in God these women did not address Jesus Christ or Allah in their narratives. In exploring the literature (intertextuality) of these stories I learned this was not an expression of their silence but congruent with the cultural context of religion in Liberia where the term God is the preferred terminology when referring to a deity.

I additionally explore the cultural manifestations of silence in Chapter V as I address the various ways that these Liberian women choose not to include information in either their life stories or in recalling their histories to immigration officials.

Slippage is manifested by the inconsistencies or contradictions in the narrative. Much like silence, these narratives must be analyzed in a cultural context in order to understand the cultural milieu of their stories therefore informing a new analysis paradigm.

Intertextuality is the comparison and analysis of participant's text narratives. In narrative research, comparisons are made between and within the narratives of individual participants and are also related/compared to the scholarly literature. All of my participants speak of God and Kin in their narratives. Faith and family are significant support systems, identified in the life stories of the Liberian women that I interviewed, that assisted these women with resiliency and maintaining hope. My analysis of their life stories are compared to Williams (1993) biblical interpretation of Hagar in Sisters in the Wilderness. I posit that this comparison of Hagar, a single head of household who depends on God for her survival, mirrors my participants' narratives which speak of faith

and courage to protect their children. I assert that spirituality, a theme that has only recently begun to surface in social work literature, must be addressed when working cross culturally as means of strengthening individuals and community support systems.

Collective Subjective is a social group of people who share the same beliefs and problems, and use the same vocabulary. The narratives of my seven Liberian women expressed a collective subjective of mothering, struggling, faith, and survival as these African women all experienced the trauma of fleeing their homeland as single heads of households. I contend that this subjective collective mirrors Williams' (1993) biblical interpretation of Hagar as Sister in the Wilderness where their trust in God assures the survival of these mothers and their children.

## **Participants**

### ***Recruitment of Participants***

I interviewed seven Liberian refugee women who emigrated from Liberia to the United States of America since 2002. Although all the participants currently live in Greensboro, North Carolina and Austin, Texas, two women were initially resettled in New Hampshire and Arizona. A critical step in this research endeavor was to build a trusting relationship with each participant. Relationship building is especially important in work with refugee and immigrant communities unaccustomed to the formal research practices of the Western world. In many refugee cultures, trust is built through personal connections and relationship-building, not through bureaucratic requirements such as human subject protection procedures. Being aware of this, I tried to approach data

gathering in a culturally appropriate manner and used family ties and personal connections in both Greensboro and Austin to establish trusting relationships.

My interest in Liberia and the lives of Liberian women stems initially from my collaboration with the *Center for New North Carolinians*. The *Center for New North Carolinians* sponsored a field trip for several Liberian refugee women to the North Carolina Conference for Women in Charlotte, North Carolina in October 2006. I attended the conference with this group of Liberian women. The keynote address was given by President Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female president of an African country. This was a profound experience for these Liberian women because President Johnson Sirleaf spoke of hope and positive changes in their homeland. This experience was a powerful example of the promise and ability of female world leaders because the message was delivered by a Liberian woman. The day trip was coordinated by Mary Anne Busch, PhD, Director of Glen Haven Community Center, a center for newly resettled refugees, who knew these women and their families well. Dr. Busch is also my mother. These Liberian women are aware of and appreciated this kinship relationship, as the bonds between family members are highly valued in African culture.

After this initial meeting, I collaborated with these women through the *Center for New North Carolinians* on health awareness, lead paint prevention program also based at the Glen Haven Community Center. I was the principal investigator of the lead paint project and was able to train, recruit and employ several Liberian women for peer-teaching on the dangers of lead paint to children. Through my initial attendance at the conference, my work on the lead paint project, and my familial relationships, I met and

developed a positive, trusting relationship with many of these participants and their families.

Glen Haven apartments, is a privately owned complex in north Greensboro whose tenants are predominately refugees and immigrants from the highlands of Vietnam and Africa. Most of the Glen Haven residents have been in the United States less than six years. The local refugee resettlement agencies, *Lutheran Family Services* and *Jewish Services*, place refugees in cluster sites to more easily offer formal case management support and create an informal supportive environment. The participants in this inquiry are among a new wave of refugees to Glen Haven. Because many of these children and parents have little or no formal education, the need for educational support was quickly recognized. To meet this need, a collaborative with the Center for New North Carolinians, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro-School of Human and Environmental Sciences, Lutheran Family Services and Glen Haven apartments was established. Two adjoining apartments house the tutorial and educational program.

I also bonded with the Liberian community in Austin, Texas through family connections. My sister, Noël Busch-Armendariz, PhD, a social work educator at the University of Texas at Austin directs a project, *Greenleaf*, which provides support services and case management to refugees and immigrants in Austin. One of Dr. Busch-Armendariz's colleagues provided introductions to, and coordinated my interviews with two Liberian participants residing in Texas. Undoubtedly, because these women and their families trusted my sister's colleague, they were open to sharing their life stories with me.

I recognize and appreciate how these family connections positively contributed to this study and assisted me in building a trusting relationship with these women.

### ***Participant Descriptions***

For confidentiality purposes, I have changed the names of my participants. I seriously contemplated how to refer to my participants in this document. Questions that I considered were: Would I address them as individuals or as a collective group? If addressed as individuals, would I use actual or fictitious names? And, if I chose to give fictitious name, what pseudonyms would I chose? After much consideration, I assigned pseudonyms to my participants. It is important that readers understand the magnitude of each individual story and the poignancy in each narrative as it connections to each woman's unique life. Researchers often unfairly report generic interpretations and fail to examine the context and cultural frameworks of meaning. Too often, voices of women, especially poor, women of color are overlooked or diminished. To guard against this, I have chosen to identify participants using pseudonyms. The decision to individually identify these women is also a personal political statement that acknowledges their contributions to their children, families, country, and nation and our knowledge. I balance this framework with valuing the collective subjective interpretation of these women's life stories as I assert that their narratives employ significant themes that embody the collective experience of these women. I also chose to name participants consistent with African cultural traditions where names are revered and carefully selected to reflect the hopes, dreams, and position of a child in the family and community.



I selected pseudonyms using typical African names that reflected each woman's strengths and personalities. These names carry religious or spiritual meaning. This decision illustrates the importance of *God-Talk* (in Chapter IV) in African culture. The names selected were: Divine, Peace, Mercy, Faith, Patience, Grace, and Blessing. A brief description of these women is provided here. More details of their stories are provided in the interview and analysis sections. Also see Appendix.

*Divine* is in her late thirties and is the mother of four children ranging in age from infancy to teens; one child was born in Liberia, two children were born in refugee camps, and her fourth child was born in the United States. Divine is twice widowed and is currently married to the father of her youngest child. She is a faithful Pentecostal but is familiar with Islam, the religion of her first husband. Divine is the most educated of all the participants. She attended a Catholic high school in Liberia. Divine fled to a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast during the war.

*Peace* is in her seventies, but told immigration services that she was in her fifties so she could be employed in the United States. Although that was what she aspired to she has not been able to work because of health problems. She is the mother of three grown children; none are living in the United States. She is Muslim widow and was the second of three wives in a polygamous household. Her husband died in Liberia; she lives with the son of her husband's first wife and his family. Peace has not had any formal schooling but worked as a tradeswoman in Liberia. During the war Peace fled to a refugee camp in Guinea. Peace attends a mosque in Greensboro, NC.

*Mercy* is in her early forties and is the mother of either three or four children; this fact was difficult to clarify. One of her children lives in the United States. She is widowed from her first husband who was Christian and is currently married to a Muslim although they have recently separated. She did not have any formal education in Liberia. Initially Mercy fled to Sierra Leone and seven years later fled to Guinea when war broke out in Sierra Leone.

*Faith* is in her mid thirties and is the mother of three children ranging from elementary school-age to teenage. She is an evangelical Christian whose husband is a pastor. Faith also has health problems that prevent her from full-time employment. During the war Faith fled to a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast.

*Patience* is a widow in her early sixties. She is the mother of twelve children, seven of whom (six daughters and one son) were living when the war broke out. She became separated from all but two of her daughters during the war. She currently lives with these two grown daughters, their children, and her eleven year old granddaughter whose mother lives in Africa. She attends the Church of Latter Day Saints. She received no formal education in Liberia and worked on her farm. Initially Patience fled to Sierra Leone when the Liberian war broke out but seven years later had to flee to Guinea when war broke out in Sierra Leone. This was when she became separated with one of her daughters.

*Grace* is a widow in her late forties and the mother of eight; six of her children live in the United States with her and two of her children are in refugee camps in West Africa. She is Muslim and attends a mosque in Austin, Texas. Grace's mother was

Christian and her father was Muslim. She had no formal schooling in Liberia and worked on a farm. In 1991 Grace fled to a refugee camp in Sierra Leone. In 1997 when war broke out in Sierra Leone she and her children fled to a refugee camp in Guinea.

*Blessing* is in her late thirties or early forties, married and is the mother of seven, all of whom live in the United States with her. She and her husband are Muslim and attend a mosque in Austin, Texas. Blessing's husband attended high school in Liberia, but she had no formal schooling. She currently stays at home to raise their children. Blessing's husband was present during our interview and contributed in telling her life history. Blessing and her children fled to a refugee camp in Sierra Leone where she was reunited with her husband after being separated from one another for more than eight months due to the war. After war broke out in Sierra Leone, they fled to a refugee camp in Guinea.

### ***Incentives for Participants***

To respect their time and contributions to this research, all participants were compensated monetarily. Philosophically and symbolically, this payment acknowledged participants' for time that they may have otherwise spent in employment or other activities, and also confirmed the value of their stories. In addition, these women live at or below poverty level and are financially in need. A grant from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Office of Leadership and Service Learning provided the financial support.

### ***Human Subjects Review***

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study. Each participant signed an informed consent prior to our interview. The consent form was either read by the participant or verbally explained by the researchers. Research assistants and other staff signed confidentiality forms.

### **Researcher's Subjectivity**

In conducting my research, I am conscious of my own positionality and strive to resist the *gaze*, often an aspect of other research methodologies. My life experience draws me to this research and connects me to the African community. I am a former refugee social worker, the wife of an African immigrant, and the mother of three multicultural and multiracial children. I am deeply interested in understanding the role of African mothers in parenting. Kleinman and Copp (1993) assert that “fieldworkers enter the field as more than researchers. Our identities and life experiences shape the political and ideological stances we take in our research” (p. 10). Similarly, Peshkin (1988) believes that “one’s subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearch aspects of our life” (p. 17). I strove to recognize the importance of my subjectivity in all aspects of my life. In particular, I paid close attention to my subjectivity and my personal experience in the recruitment and interview processes. Participants were aware of my personal connections to Africa and refugee communities and because of my life story I was viewed as trustworthy. As a result, I was able to achieve the confidence of my participants. At the end of one of my interviews I knew that I had gained my participant’s trust and acceptance as she complemented me,

stating, “Because you marry our countryman Black. I know you say you come from one man from one part but also you married Black. You married Black. You married Black, so you be Black oh!” Throughout the analysis and writing phase I worked to be aware of my subjectivity and as Peshkin (1988) suggests, researchers should “at least disclose to their readers where self and subject became joined” (p. 17).

### **Interviews**

My initial interview question was “Tell me the story of your life.” This question was purposely broad to allow each participant to begin where she wanted, and to craft her story as she chose. In utilizing narrative research methodology I sought to be open and to be led by these participants. I determined the first question (Tell me the story of your life) and then each woman began her story and put emphasis on what she thought was important to share. As a researcher, I strove to pay close attention to their creation of self in the narrative. I was the only researcher present for two of interviews (Patience and Blessing). I conducted two interviews (Grace and Peace) with the assistance of the liaisons (Dr. Busch in one interview and Laurie Cook Heffron, my sister’s colleague, in the other). Two undergraduate social work students participated in three interviews (Divine, Mercy, and Faith) in North Carolina. Students’ participation fulfilled a requirement in their research course; they were supported through a community-based research grant offered through the Office of Leadership and Service Learning at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. This provided an opportunity to teach and mentor undergraduate social work students about narrative research and also was a way to monitor my own subjectivity.

In North Carolina, each participant was offered a written copy of “her story.” During the interviews I found that most of these women had limited educational opportunities in their homeland, and none owned computers or were able to type. Consequently, their ability to document their experiences in a form other than through oral tradition was limited. So, I also offered to give them their audio and video tapes from the interviews. This form of documentation, more so than a written document, is significant because of the practice of oral traditions in Africa. The women were appreciative of the offer and expressed gratitude for the ability to share their stories with their children and family, future generations, and as a legacy.

I am especially pleased about including this “gift” in my research process as documentation of their incredible and heroic lives and as a symbol of hope of the future. Their narratives allow future generations to learn of this history. While the women embraced the idea of telling their stories as a way to document their experiences and provide a legacy for their children, they also understand the potential of this project to influence program, policies and services.

### ***Setting***

My research participants decided where to be interviewed. Some possibilities were in their own homes, at the Glen Haven Community Center in a private meeting room, at the university, or another place of their choosing. It is of utmost importance to assure privacy and anonymity during the interview. When given control of the interview location participants were more likely to feel safe to speak freely. All but one participant chose to interview in their own homes. The participant who chose to be interviewed at the

Glen Haven Community Center said that because many people lived in her home she wanted a setting that was relatively quiet. All seven interviews were audio taped. Two were also simultaneously video-taped to assess for nonverbal cues and to increase verbal clarity. The first two interviews were video taped and I quickly learned that the presence of the video camera impeded the participants' comfort. Therefore, the remaining interviews were just audio-taped. The interviews took one and one half to two hours each. In addition to student and liaison participation, the two Texas interviews included other family members. One participant's husband and another participant's son were present. I hypothesized that they requested a male presence for support, since they had not previously met me and that the presence of others was culturally acceptable.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

All the interviews were transcribed in their entirety by my research student assistant or myself, and checked for accuracy. While necessary, the checking process was arduous for multiple reasons. Initially, this task was tedious due to the participants' distinctive Liberian accents and use of Liberian-English. While I am very familiar with several African accents, there are distinct differences between countries. I am most accustomed to a Nigerian accent that differs in pace, intonation, and phrases from a Liberian accent. Most of the Liberian women spoke very rapidly, especially as they became emotional and animated in telling their stories. In addition, colloquial expressions between Liberia and Nigeria differ. In order to fully understand participants during the interviews I often repeated what participants said or asked a clarifying question. During

transcription, I listened intently to their audio tapes; eventually I began to develop an ear for the Liberian accent and an understanding of Liberian-English phrases.

Another problem that made the data collection and transcription processes personally challenging was the emotional nature of each story. In addition to hearing stories of resilience and hope, these poignant stories also described struggles of survival, hardship, grief, loss, and death. In sharing her story each woman gave me a piece of herself, a precious gift to me and this project, that I will treasure. I remember the voices of these women, the inflection in their speech, and the animation of their physical presence as they recounted their life stories. I am truly appreciative of their ability to trust me.

Kleinman and Copp (1993) contend that “qualitative researchers only gain control of their projects by first allowing themselves to lose it” (p. 3). It is with this philosophy that I approached my interviews and analyses. In addition to letting my participants lead the interview, during the analysis phase I tried to be open to new ideas and paradigms. I allowed the narratives to evoke cultural frameworks of meaning inherent to the cultural context of these women’s life stories. Casey (1995-1996) asserts “every narrative is highly constructed text structured around a cultural framework of meaning and shaped by particular patterns of inclusion, omission, and disparity” (p. 234).

I followed the narrative methodological procedure of scrutinizing intertextuality. Each narrative was evaluated individually and analyses were performed across narratives for the assessment of themes that intersected each story. Themes were also compared with the scholarly literature. My continued work and relationships with many of the



participants facilitated the uncovering of these ideas and allowed themes to become visible; Tete (2005) refers to this action as “informal conversations providing contextual insight.” Finally, direct quotations ground the themes in the data. I have purposely recorded the actual words of my participants, however ungrammatical they may seem, to value their voice and honor the significance of their language. Casey (1993) contends that language is “defined as the way in which human beings make meaning” (p. 3). In constructing meaning to their narratives, these women’s words allow the reader to feel the magnitude of their voice and experience the cultural context of their stories. Chapters IV and V fully discussed the major themes of God-Talk and Kin-Talk.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **GOD-TALK**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter titled God-Talk, and the subsequent chapter titled Kin-Talk, address two major themes that emerged in analysis of the dialogue between the researcher and the participants. These themes speak to the fluidity in defining religion and family, specifically those of my participants, and exemplify Liberian cultural values and beliefs. I define God-Talk as the language that manifests the incorporation of spirituality and religion in everyday lives; I define Kin-Talk as the language that expresses the expansive cultural interpretation of family. I assert that social workers need to understand the cultural context of these values and beliefs which encompass Liberian social, political, religious, and cultural frameworks. Creating awareness, through the collective epistemologies of my participants, allows social workers to frame culturally competent paradigms.

Across the participants' narratives, the God-Talk construct is prevalent regardless of different religious affiliations. Three of the participants are Muslim; four are Christian. Of the four Christian women, two are Evangelical Christian and one woman is a member of the Church of Latter Day Saints, the fourth woman describes herself as Christian but did not specify a church affiliation. The women appear to understand and accept religious diversity, perhaps due to the prevalence of religiously mixed marriages in Liberia. As

evidence of this custom, two of the Christian women have either current or previous husbands who are Muslim and one the Muslim participant's mother was Christian. These women utilize a cultural framework of meaning that incorporates their collective understanding of African God-Talk that encompasses communication and reliance on God to protect and guide them and to ensure their families' survival.

I utilize the theoretical framework of Womanist God-Talk to examine and analyze the narratives of these Liberian women. Their stories have similarities to the biblical story of Hagar-in-the-wilderness. This black feminist Christian framework, as interpreted by African American theologian, Delores Williams, explores the symbolism of oppressed African American women with this biblical text. Williams contends

Apparently Hagar in the wilderness as an image of womanhood – poor, hardworking, strong, self-reliant, autonomous, committed to her family, communicating with God – continues to live and thrive in the African-American world. (Williams, 1993, p. 129)

I believe that this theological perspective also applies to the life stories of the Liberian refugee women that I interviewed.

Because of civil war, these women were forced to flee their homeland turning their world upside down. More than half of my participants are defined as “double flight,” a term coined by the United States Refugee Program (USRP), meaning that after escaping their homeland and fleeing to a neighboring country, they were once again forced to flee their second country of asylum as war broke out again. All of these women were separated from their spouses. Although two women were reunited with their husbands, the five remaining women are widowed. All of the women had multiple

children and are responsible for maintaining their safety and welfare. These families struggled to survive in a tumultuous environment where their basic needs for survival were non-existent or inadequate. They were devoid of any sense of safety and security.

The metaphor of being in a wilderness is very apt, as these Liberian women and their children existed in a barren and perilous environment. Much like Hagar, these women believed that their well-being and protection were due to their faith that God would guide and guard them from harm and would give them strength and resilience to endure hardships. Williams (1993) asserts that the Hagar-in-the-wilderness symbolism

affirms such qualities as defiance; risk-taking; independence; endurance when endurance gives no promise; the stamina to hold things together for the family (even without the help of a mate); the ability, in poverty, to make a way out of no way; the courage to initiate political action in the public arena; and a close personal relationship God. (p. 122)

The life stories of these women demonstrate these qualities and expound on the language of God-talk which relates to the religious tenets in African culture.

In order to appreciate the cultural, political and social milieu of these narratives, one must understand the historical context of religion in Liberia. Much like the complex historical origin of Liberia, the religious background of Liberia is varied. Religion in Liberia has a fluidity and flexibility that is unlike religion in Western societies. In order to value and respect this difference, it is imperative that the researcher be open to new paradigms of thinking, viewing this culture through an alternative lens and which dispels the inclination of the “gaze” in analyzing a new culture.

### **Historical Context of Religion in Liberia**

Gifford (1998) describes religion as a concept that

provides definitions, principles of judgment and criteria of perception. It offers a reading of the world, of history, of society, of time, of space, of power, of authority, of justice and of ultimate truth. Religion limits or increases the conceptual tools available, restricts or enlarges emotional responses, or channels them, and withdraws certain issues from inquiry. It inculcates a particular way of perceiving, experiencing and responding to reality. (p. 26)

Religion is a protective factor for many Liberians who are experiencing economic and social hardships. Beginning in the 1920's and gaining strength in the mid- and late-1900's there were a number of religions which began to take root in Liberia. The Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i, Muslims, Seventh-Day Adventists and Catholics all began their missions in Liberia and were positively received as they provided emotional support and resources to the average citizens of Liberia. Gifford (1993) states that during this time period, many Liberians were disconnected from their tribal support systems as they began to relocate to cities from their home villages and townships. This transition left a void in the emotional and general support once met by traditional tribal support systems in their home villages. In addition to emotional support, religious institutions and churches offered "a sense of shared identity [and] they gave members status—acquired rather than ascribed status perhaps for the very first time—and a function" (Gifford, 1993, p. 288). Mirroring the social support offered by many churches in the American South during the segregation era, these churches provided the glue for families in transition.

In the United States, there are multiple divisions among the socio-political positions of Christian institutions which encompass diverse viewpoints, attitudes and beliefs; this is not true in Liberia. Gifford (1993) describes Liberian Christianity in the 1980's as having only two distinctions, the "biblical Christians" and the "political Christians." These two different versions divide among class lines, the political Christians having more economic wealth and power than the biblical Christians; neither questions the privilege and power of the elite. The political Christians were composed of the mainline denominations while the biblical Christians were defined as the evangelical, faith movement and independent churches. The biblical churches professed to not engaging in the politics of the nation and were content with freedom of worship; this action was supported and co-opted by the Doe regime as a means of avoiding attention to the corruption and injustice of the government. All the women that I interviewed have limited education. Despite their religious mix (even within the Christian groups), the Christian women would probably be described as biblical Christians.

Liberia has not adopted liberation theology as a means of interpreting and counteracting injustice, a theology that many developing countries acquired as a foundation in their struggle. Gifford (1993) contends that Liberia is unlike other African countries that adopt Western Christianity and subsequently alter existing beliefs, practices and ideology into African Christianity. Liberia is heavily influenced by American Christianity where the religious viewpoint "was devised in the southern states of America and inextricably bound up with Western culture" (p. 296). Gifford (1993) asserts that Liberia's reflection of American Christianity is tied to the recent political

relationship of the United States with the (President) Doe regime and that this was just another manifestation of hegemony.

A 2005 report issued by the Center for Applied Linguistics states that animism, ancestral worship, Christianity, and Islam are the predominant forms of religion in Liberia. Religious membership is many times connected with tribal affiliations as “the Americo-Liberians, Bassa, Gio/Dan, Kpelle, and Kru are predominantly Christian, the Gola, Mandingo, and Vai tend to be predominantly Moslem” (Kollehlon et al., 2005, p. 29). Many times animism and ancestral worship, belief systems that have predated modern religions, are incorporated into the practicing beliefs and rituals of Christianity and Islam, and are not viewed as separate from each other. Animism relates to the doctrine of the power of spirits and the spiritual realm in protecting or causing harm to individuals. Kollehlon et al. (2005) further delineate animism as “shamanism, the belief in a person who is able to communicate with the spirits; and totemism, the belief in a special kinship between humans and animals or plants” (p. 28). Juju, or witchcraft, is also an African belief system that believes in special powers to help or harm others.

Most of the ruling party of Liberia, the Americo-Liberians, had strong religious affiliations with the Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian churches until the 1980’s (Gifford, 1998; Hastings, 1979). Several politicians, most notably William Tubman and William Tolbert, who served terms as Presidents of Liberia from 1944 until 1980, were instrumental in the leadership of various religious institutions. William Tubman, a lay minister in the Methodist church, was the son of a Methodist minister; William Tolbert served as a pastor and president of the World Baptist Alliance while in office (Hastings,

1979). Tolbert was known to appoint religious leaders to political positions during his administration. Neither of these heads of government considered their roles in religious institutions a conflict with their governmental obligations (Taryor, 1984). Gifford (1993) contends that the adoption of Christianity by the ruling elite serves as another differentiation in the social hierarchy of Liberian culture where Christianity is shaped by class differences.

Despite this solid Protestant influence, many Liberians have blended traditional religious traditions with Western Christianity. Taryor (1984) and Ellis (1999) demonstrate this fusion. Taryor (1984) reported that 80% of Liberians professed a traditional African religion, while 15% were Christian and 5% were Muslim (p. 54). These scholars maintain that Taryor's statistics were not accurately representative of religious affiliations as many Liberians relate to multiple memberships and that "even people who do not consider themselves Christian have been greatly influenced by Christian beliefs which they have incorporated into the existing repertoire of religious thought" (Ellis, 1999, p. 227).

Richards (2005), in Kastfelt's edited book, *Religion and African Civil Wars*, presents an interview of Rose, a Sierra Leonean woman who had worked in Liberia and upon returning to her country was abducted by the Sierra Leonean rebel group, the RUF, for over two years. Rose describes that part of the daily routine was to have morning prayers. She recounts that these prayers were both Christian and Islamic. This illustrates the coexistence of Christianity and Islam in Liberia and Sierra Leone—even in times and places of brutality and bondage.



Islam in Liberia was brought to Liberia by the Mandingo traders in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Islam, shaped by the cultural context of Liberia, does not follow Sharia or fundamental law and differs from the Islamic tradition in other parts of Africa and the Middle East where Islam is more restricting of the roles and privileges for women. Peace,<sup>2</sup> a Muslim participant, describes her independence as a tradeswoman. As the second of three wives, in a polygamous marriage, she felt both autonomous and supported in her role. Speaking of her husband and his encouragement of her profession she states

He made me a business person too. So he can let me go in any country to do my business and country. I can go to Senegal, I can go to Ghana, I can go to Togo, I can go to Nigeria. I take car, I go to Nigeria, Lagos.

This role depicts the liberal interpretation of Islamic law in Liberia which would not be typical for Muslim women in other countries or tribes that observe more conservative Islamic practices where women are expected to remain in the household and not take part in business ventures.

### **Singing as an Expression of Faith**

Ellis (1999) and Gifford (1998) contend that Liberia was built on the foundation of Christianity. One of the missions for the newly arrived freed slaves, who were later to become the founding fathers of Liberia, was to evangelize and convert the indigenous Liberians who worshiped traditional religions. The Americo Liberians brought with them Christianity which was borne out of their experiences as slaves on white owned

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<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

plantations in America (Taryor, 1984; Gifford, 1994). Taryor (1984) describes this religion as having an “evangelical thrust, putting special emphasis on ‘eschatology’ (the end things) emotional release, and a church-centered social life in the community” (p. 53). Gifford (1993) asserts that since many of the slaves were illiterate that Christianity “placed an emphasis on worship rather than doctrine” (p. 48). This method of worship which included songs and stories was easily transferred to Liberia as a culturally grounded method of religious structure as oral traditions have been valued over written interpretation. One participant, Faith, a deeply religious woman and the wife of a Liberian pastor, spoke of singing as a way to help lift her spirits especially as she battled her health issues. At the end of my interview, Faith described how singing hymns would help her cope with depression and frustration. She stated that she used to “cry and lay down” but also said “so when I was sick, I also used to sing.” It was at this point that Faith began to sing two hymns. The first hymn is called “God You Never Share Your Glory with No Man.” The words are

You never share your glory with anybody oh mighty God, that is your name. You are my God, that is your name . . . you never share your glory with any man! You may never share your glory with anybody oh mighty God, that is your name.

Faith reports “And when I sing it, sing it, sing it. I just cry, cry, cry and then I just happy to be here and then I get up, get strength!” The second song entitled “Let there be love among us” speaks to a loving God and is symbolic of her hope for love and peace. It is reassuring that after witnessing a horrific and brutal war, and suffering from a chronic

disease that has left her unable to work, that Faith has been able to maintain her hope for love. Faith conveys that she likes to sing this song when she is feeling sick. She sings

Let there be love found among us. Let there be love! Let there be love in our life!  
Let there be love shared among us! Let there be love, Agape love, let there be  
love!

It is evident from her happy and relaxed demeanor as she sings that singing helps comfort and strengthens her. Much like Negro spirituals helped African Americans as they toiled through a harsh and abusive life, singing becomes a cathartic means of coping with struggles and hardships. Faith reports “When I’m down, I feel like if I just sing; sing another song, to another song, another song. When I finish singing, I just be happy in my body!” Oosthuizen (1979) contends that in African culture that singing hymns is the highest method of worshiping because “much of the singing has a trance effect; when their own hymns are sung they spring to life” (p. 22).

### **Spirits**

Ellis (1999) writes that religions in Liberia have always had political and social significance. He cites the strong ties that the Christians have had within the ruling governmental party, as well as, the equally solid connections among the Mandingo traders to Islam. However despite these associations, he also asserts that there are equally powerful political and social links to traditional religious beliefs and religious societies (some refer to them as secret societies). Ellis (1999) cites Siegmann, an ethnographer, who states:

The political aspect of religion arose from the very nature of people's religious beliefs, because Liberians of all religious persuasions tended to see themselves, as 'as inhabiting a world propelled and controlled by an invisible order of personalized spiritual beings which interact with humans in a variety of ways and which must be taken into account at every juncture. (p. 199)

Therefore, it is not uncommon for Liberians who are devout Christians and Muslims to have a belief in the power of spirits, masks, dreams, spiritual powers, and juju. This belief system crosses all social class systems. Ellis (1999) states

Traditionally, all power was thought to derive from the invisible spirits who are believed to inhabit the world, notably those in the forest, the animals and the ancestors, and these spirits could easily enter a living being who then became possessed by them. (p. 201)

President Doe is an example of a Liberian political leader who had strong beliefs in spirits and supernatural powers. Doe utilized this belief system as a means of placing himself in a position of power and authority as well as protecting himself from harm. He believed that he was destined to be the leader of Liberia. He felt that his special powers sheltered him from any real life threat of an overthrow or coup (although ironically he was brutally murdered in a coup d'état) and he professed that he was invincible to death. He also used this belief system as a form of intimidation to rule his nation as he prophesized that spirits would harm anyone who challenged his rule. Ellis (1999) and Moran (2006) both speak of the "heartmen" who were supposedly spirits who were responsible for ritual killings of young people. These spirits killed and ate the hearts of innocent youth to cause fear in the community; this ritual occurred many times especially during election time as a means of intimidation and coercion.

### **Dreams**

In addition to the belief in spirits, many Liberians of varying faiths and social positions put credence in the messages and interpretations of dreams. Ellis (1999) contends that valuing the concept of dreams is prevalent in Liberia and throughout Africa as an important vehicle for interpreting communication from the spirits. Dreams

are commonly believed to be, not a purely subjective phenomenon, nor the product of the unconscious, as in Freudian psychology, but messages from a spirit world which has a real and objective existence. (Ellis, 1999, p. 267)

Spirits, dreams and power are all intertwined in the belief system that power emanates from spirits which are a part of this world and may take the form of a person or an animal. Spirits can occupy the body of a person either permanently or temporarily and with or without the knowledge and consent of the individual. The power of the spiritual world has direct impact on the everyday world. Liberians believe that some people possess special powers which allow them to take on the form of an animal and/or to predict the future through dreams. Dreams then are a highly regarded form of listening to the spirit world and may foretell the future. Ellis (1999) gives multiple accounts of the dogma of dreams and spirits as either an explanation of a person's behavior such as a number of Liberian leaders: Doe, Johnson and Taylor who all predicted their positions of power through dreams; Ellis (1999) contends "the exhibition of great power is widely taken as a sign that a person has been privileged by the spirit world" (p. 280).

Additionally, Ellis (1999) describes dreams as a means of foreshadowing the future such as of the demise of Doe by an average woman who recounts a dream

foretelling Doe's death the day before he was captured; to the significance of dreams in illustrating painful events such as the description of dreams from past soldiers describing their traumatic events through dream activity. The spiritual realm and dreams must be understood to have special force that influences the wellbeing and destiny of individuals. This notion of portending the future is evident in the life story of Faith who has been diagnosed with diabetes. Although she is an Evangelical Christian, whose husband is a pastor, Faith expresses her belief in dreams and spirits by the story that she shares. Faith describes the realization of her illness as it was revealed to her through a dream. When asked how she knew that she was sick she states

Eh, I really don't know but I had a dream, and in my dream it was in the night and three o'clock, the person came in and knocked on my door and I say 'Eh? This time of night, who is knocking at me door?' So I opened the door and [her daughter] she was behind me so when I opened the door, before I got sick, when I opened the door I saw two armed [men] so I tried to run and when I turned around [daughter] was behind me and myself. I fell and I dropped on the ground and the person took the gun and cranked it three times and a shot, no came out. So when he turned around and looked at me he said 'God bless you' and he left.

Faith asserts that this dream represented the start of her sickness as well as symbolized how close she came to death. She asserted that she was spared due to the grace of God. Following a subsequent dream, Faith reported that an animal appeared to her as another sign of her impending illness. She stated:

And I had another dream. And uh, after it happen, I was walking home. There was a spider web came down on my face. I can see it, I can see it! I just like, I got on the road, to go on the road and a spider web, every time so happened to move I would see it and go quick. I told my husband 'We pray, we pray, pray for me'. So the sickness started coming.

This story depicted the source of her illness as emanating from a force that represented itself as a spider. Faith also recounted the unexplained disappearance of her underwear as an indication and causation of her medical problems. She reports that despite being financially compromised she purchased some new undergarments because she was not feeling well and had stomach problems. In taking special care of her clothing she relates,

I wore it, I washed it, and put it [underwear] behind my bed. And up to now I do not know who took it from behind my bed. But from that time, the infection started to give me problems, my stomach

This description expresses Faith's belief that poor health and illness can emanate from the invisible world and that individuals are vulnerable to bad luck. Oosthuizen (1979) relates that "wrong-doing and sickness are associated with each other and witchcraft, concentrated evil, asocial and abnormal, is often encountered" (p. 9). He asserts that prayer, singing and dancing are practices that aid the African in healing and are better received than Western medical practices. Additionally, viewing health problems as relating to mental health issues or psychosomatic illness is not a concept in African healing. Oosthuizen (1979) addresses the concept that "organic illness is almost always attributed to either witchcraft, bad medicine, or wrong relationships and not to anxiety, worry, and stress which are so often the major problems" (p. 9).

### **Sisters in the Wilderness**

In Liberia, the use of prayer and faith in God are culturally appropriate means of protecting oneself against evil and combating bad luck. In Islam, the religious ideology of

Inshallah, meaning God's will, is a belief which guides Muslims in their prayers and faith. I have found this to be the case in the life stories of my participants regardless of their religious affiliation. Many of these women utilized "God talk" vernacular as they described the rationale for their survival by testifying "It wasn't easy but by the grace of God we went through" or "God, thank you for leading us from there" and "God just opened a way for me, start blessing me." This language is reminiscent of Womanist theology most notably the biblical story of Hagar. Williams (1993) in her book, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, expounds on the illustration of the biblical character, Hagar, in describing the struggles of African American women and their relationship with God as a means of protection and safety. Utilizing Womanist theology, a philosophy which

attempts to help black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African-American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being. (Williams, 1993, p. xiv)

Williams interprets the biblical story of Hagar as resonant with the experiences of many African American women where God is the sole protector of the dispossessed. In this narrative, God protects Hagar in two different occasions; the first work of protection relates to God assuring Hagar's basic need of survival, his later action concerns Hagar's ability to sustain her independence despite her lack of resources. Hagar, the slave of Sarah and Abraham, is impregnated by her slave master when Sarah is unable to conceive a child. Hagar flees her master's home running into the wilderness but returns after



hearing the voice of God commanding her to go back. In this biblical passage, God is protecting Hagar from the harsh reality that neither she nor her unborn child would survive in the wilderness. Later, after her child was born, Hagar and her son were sent away without provisions and it was God who provided for them. Williams asserts that it is Hagar's adherence in obeying God which allows her to survive.

Williams (1993) compares the harsh realities of Hagar's slavery and abuse to the experiences of African American women who have had to overcome discrimination and oppression stating "for both Hagar and the African American women, the wilderness experience meant standing utterly alone, in the midst of serious trouble, with only God's support to rely on" (p. 109). This comparison can be extended to the experiences of Liberian refugee women as they narrate their stories of leaving their country, alone and forlorn. One of my Muslim participants, Peace, recounts her own experience of feeling confused and fearful when she was fleeing Liberia. She describes wanting to remain in her home despite seeing other people leaving their village for safety. Peace asserts her intentions by stating "I say I will not leave my husband's yard. I will be there and spend my life." However after realizing that her husband was dead and realizing that she had no options; she knew that she needed to leave their farm and she escaped stating "I took the two children and I put them in the swamp, me and the children." Peace later states that despite her confusion that she trusted God stating "You do not know where you are going. God can carry you, God can save you." This description portrays Peace's understanding of Inshallah, God's will to protect and guide her. It is in this account that she describes her faith in God to safely guide her despite her initial resistance to leaving

her village. Much like Hagar, this woman left her home under distress with no options other than the possibility of death.

Descriptions of God's assistance and the strength of prayer when fleeing their home are prevalent throughout these narratives. Another widow, Patience, a member of the Church of Latter Day Saints, states

Me [states her name] sitting down here from 1990 are from my country. I do not get no man, me and my three children are running, sleeping on the road. Saw people beating people. Saw people beating people, Africa. Killing people. God helped me before I reached in America.

A third woman, Divine, a Pentecostal, describes the horrendous event of having rebels attack her home, killing her husband and family members. Divine describes running into the bathroom, an out-house, for safety. She recalls hiding behind the door for many hours "until, in the night" when she felt that it was safe to leave her hiding space. In narrating her story for the first time, she states "You know the story, I never tell people, but I've just got to say it." It was in this point in the interview that she begins to recollect the time when her husband, the father of her eldest son, was killed and of her own narrow escape from death by the rebels.

It was very, very hard. They started killing people. They start killing people, they kill him. And I stayed there until the night. So I start thinking. I said, 'But what am I doing in here? If I don't go out – You know, I can't through, uh, you know, in the bathroom, where everybody, somebody maybe could come use the bathroom and see me.' So, what should I do. I start thinking, and I start praying. And at night I came out. When I came out, I saw the dead bodies. Everybody lying down. Just start jumping and when I crossed I went in the bush. And I walked for two weeks to go to Ivory Coast. Yeah.

Another participant, Faith, an Evangelical Christian recalls relying on God for support, stating

So I say God give me your strength. Your strength, give me your strength. I need to go through this life. So God I need your strength. I need your strength to go through this life.

She later recounted in her story her relief in making her way to safety reporting that during her escape that she witnessed many people being killed. She relays that she was protected by God in her exodus from Liberia. Faith states “They [rebels] killed. It was not easy. I say God thank you for leading us from there.” I find that this statement resonates with the biblical description of Moses leading his people out of Egypt. Faith’s use of language describes her faith in God to direct her to safety despite the real dangers that are present.

Mercy, a Liberian woman in an abusive relationship, spoke both in my interview and in subsequent conversations about her courage and faith in God to assist her through these hard times. After my initial interview with Mercy, I continued to assist and support her as she struggled to make plans for her future. It was in this work that I continued to hear and appreciate the complexity of her story as I found this work beneficial in clarifying my understanding. Multiple interactions and familiar relationships may benefit the researcher in allowing them to be aware of the nuisances of language, as well as adding to the body of the dialogue, what Tete (2005) refers to as informal conversations providing contextual insight.

After a domestic dispute, Mercy's husband pressed charges against her. He later told her that he had dropped these charges; however, it is unclear as to whether he was truthful or whether he was also unclear about following protocol. Not realizing the importance of the court notice, or maybe not being able to read it, contributed to Mercy not showing up for her court appearance. She was picked up by the police for failure to appear and placed in jail. Her husband called me to assist them with the court process and over the next month I worked closely with Mercy. She was appointed an attorney and the charges were eventually dropped after her final court appearance. It was during this time that she expressed both her courage and uncertainty about her future. At her last court appearance as we were waiting for the court room to open up she spoke of her fear. In addressing her relationship with her husband she stated "I am not afraid of anyone but God." This statement resounds with the narratives in Williams', *Sisters in the Wilderness* and the story of Hagar where women have been oppressed and "suffered indignities and abuse from those who had more power than she did, but she defied them by resisting their authority over her movements" (Williams, 1993, p. 139).

Not only had Mercy been hurt by her husband but also by a judicial system that was foreign to her. Her statement "I am not afraid of anyone but God" reflects her courage to stand up for herself. After the last court appearance Mercy made concrete plans to separate from her husband; a proposal that was made numerous times to her by refugee resettlement workers who had tried to intervene with the domestic discord. At the time of this writing, Mercy had recently moved to a separate apartment and has begun living as a single mother. This plan for her future, albeit frightening, is hopeful that she

can become self-sufficient and provide for herself and her daughter. Much like Hagar in the Wilderness, Mercy depends on God to provide and protect her as she is not afraid of what God has planned. It is through her view of God as being all powerful that Mercy possesses inner strength and courage.

### **Suffering**

Regardless of the differences in religious upbringing and doctrine, these women describe God as their foundation and support in providing safety and guidance. Like Hagar, they put their trust in God to protect them and their children when they were in imminent danger. They also have faith in God to provide direction and support when they are “suffering.” Many of my participants spoke of “suffering” in their narratives. The language of suffering, which is attributed to religious language, is a vernacular that is used among Africans to describe sacrifice, hardship or struggling. With Africans, this vocabulary does not have a specific religious affiliation as it does in Western cultures where the word “suffering” may often be associated with Christianity.

The concept of suffering is used to describe their life during the war when they say “We were all in the war suffering” and their life in the refugee camps or their adjustment to life in America when they say the following phrases “All of us struggling” or “We all suffering.” My participants used the word “suffering” a total of thirty-seven times in their narratives. The term suffering was typically used to describe a collective experience. One woman, Patience states “My own I left because Liberia people, women right now are suffering.” She speaks of her appreciation of the American government in assisting Liberian refugees to end their suffering by testifying

The reason we come to America here is to tell the people thank you. To tell the people thank you because why, we were suffering and the people, that me, and no more suffering for me. I tell the American government thank you.

Patience attributes her end of suffering as deriving from the work of God. God helps governments and people to assist her in ending her suffering. She speaks to the hardship of being a widow who does not have the support of a husband to provide for her or her children when she says

I tell the people [American] thank you. Because woman no husband is suffering and because of helping me I do not suffer again. I get a place to sleep, my children can take money and pay rent. God helped me small, small and my children can help me pay my rent.

Patience knows the meaning of suffering in struggling to provide for even the basic necessities such as housing and food. Both Patience and two other widows, Grace and Mercy describe having to cut down trees while they were in the refugee camp as a means of providing for themselves and their children. These women used the wood to cook but they also learned the process of making “coal” from the wood. This job is traditionally a man’s work and is very labor intensive. Grace describes having to go to the refugee hospital on a monthly basis to receive “a drip” intravenous fluids, to hydrate her because of the physical exhaustion and dehydration that this work entails. She states

I go in the hospital, they put drip on. Every month. Because that coal work. I can cut the stick, everything now but when they scatter it, the heat and the dust. The heat and the dust. So every when I finish on time, I fall down, they carry me to the hospital, they go put drip on me. United Nations provided that medicine, so I did not pay nothing for the medicine.

All of these women describe their life in the refugee camps as “suffering” just to survive. Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs suggests that basic needs of shelter, food, and clothing have to be met before human beings are able to move to a higher order of thought and interaction. Maslow’s theory speaks to the hierarchy of needs, with food and shelter being at the foundation of this pyramid and the foundation of survival. The stories of these women echo their desperation in needing to provide for basic sustenance and shelter for themselves and their children which is further heightened by their position of being the sole providers for their families. Despite the fact that all of my participants were from poor to middle class families when they lived in Liberia, they did not talk about all of the economic hardships in their homeland. One participant, Divine, who was from the most economically advantaged Liberian families of all of my participants, speaks to the stark life in the refugee camp where she and her children struggled for basic necessities. She reports

So I was in Ivory Coast with all the struggle. Very hard to live. Can you imagine, you live a good life in Liberia before your parents were little, just everything turned down on you. So nothing you have even to get food to eat was very hard. To even get soap to wash your clothes, you can’t get that. You can’t even get soap to wash your clothes. So even any some days whose soap. No, I don’t even know. Very hard, you can’t even get it. You’ve got to beg your friend or someone you know.

She also speaks to the difficulties of being a widowed refugee woman stating

A woman in a refugee camp, they took us to [name of camp] to live on the refugee camp. We lived [there] they gave each person room but the room they gave you, two men, maybe two women sleeping in the same room. Everybody just put their stuff down and lay down. That’s why we were living for.

Mercy, a Christian woman who is married to a Muslim man that she met in the refugee camp, speaks of “suffering” when she addresses her tumultuous marital relationship. Mercy discloses that their relationship, although not a healthy one in the refugee camps, began to further deteriorate when they came to the United States. She reports that her husband became unsatisfied with her and was interested in having other girlfriends. She states that although they had marital problems in the refugee camp that she was able to have support and intervention by her neighbors and the refugee relief workers; once they arrived in the United States their relationship deteriorated rapidly.

Mercy states that her husband wanted to separate and “he was confused to be with me.” Their relationship became volatile and she became frustrated and they both became angry. She reports that he stopped financially providing for the family and had to be forced by the United States refugee agency to buy groceries. When provided food to prepare, he rejected eating her meals and he would “eat at another woman’s house”; in African culture this is a sign of insult. If a husband refuses to eat the food that his wife prepares, or if a wife refuses to prepare food for her husband both of these actions equate to a marital affront. Food is equated as an intimate symbolism in a marriage and sign of caring for another; therefore, a husband’s actions of eating at another woman’s home would be interpreted as a sign of his infidelity or separation from his wife. Mercy refused to sleep in their marital bed and only slept on the living room couch. She spoke of her husband’s anger and ill will towards her when she stated “I say this man is suffering. This is the reason why he got a temper like this.” In this description her husband’s suffering is equated to his internal struggle and conflict which is manifested in his abusive behavior



towards her. Even though he has treated her harshly she speaks of pity for him and ultimately herself as well.

Another woman, Peace, addresses struggling in relation to her family's sacrifice because of the hardship of the war. She vows to "suffer" or sacrifice for her children so that their future will be different. She does not dispel her belief that there could be another war; she just vows to sacrifice as a means of protecting them from a difficult future. She says

You see I just want my children to come up. Because I suffered, they suffered. I do not want my children to suffer like that again. You see that is the plan that I will get in my life now. If another war, I would suffer for my children so they would not have to suffer.

Peace positions herself to relinquish her own needs in order to provide for her children so that they will have a better future. The irony of her story is that none of Peace's children were able to accompany her to the United States as they were "scattered" around Africa and she lost touch with them as she fled the war. She currently is able to correspond with her son who is living in Ghana; she has not been able to contact her other two children who are supposedly in Guinea. Peace arrived in the United States with her "extended" family (a terminology that Americans would use and which is discussed later) who she considers her own children and to whom she was referring to when she spoke of sacrifice. Ultimately, Peace has already "suffered" for her children. She speaks of praying to God to help reunite her with her children. When asked what gives her hope she states

God. Nothing else can give me hope. Anything would be that God. In your life, anything. Because if you plan something to do, if God is not agree then you are not going to do it, eh. But if you plan something to do, if God says yes then you will be happy. You are going to be happy, you see. You say today I do not expect something and tomorrow it happen. Tomorrow you are not expecting something after tomorrow it happens. But you planning you, your own. See.

Peace's story speaks to the philosophy that suffering is a component of the hardships of her own life. It is through Peace's faith and trust in God's will that she is able to hope that "God will be in agreement" and that his plan will be to rejoin her with her children. As a Muslim, Peace expresses the Islamic tenets of Inshallah, or God's will. Submission to God directs her in accepting her future as his will.

It is through their faith in God that these women expect that their suffering will be relieved. I contend that this African view differs from some African American biblical interpretations where suffering is viewed as redemptive and in which the symbolism of redemption is Christ dying on the cross. Williams (1993) is in disagreement with the use of suffering by some religious scholars, such as Martin Luther King Jr., who contends that suffering can be "a creative and powerful social force" (p. 200) in addressing discrimination and inequities. Atonement theory emphasizes suffering as a necessary component which causes the oppressor to examine their moral conscience and change their harsh practice. Williams (1993) contends that this theological underpinning maintains "violence, victimization, and undeserved suffering" for women. In quoting feminist scholars Brown and Parker, Williams (1993) affirms the need to reframe the biblical interpretation of "struggle" to signify Jesus as fighting for "justice, radical love and liberation" (p. 201) and not as viewing human suffering as a model for self-

sacrificing behavior. I agree with Williams' and other Womanist theologians whose analysis regards suffering in a Christian context that is tied to survival of black women. This understanding is validated by the stories of my Liberian women participants who speak of their suffering and their struggle for survival in an oppressive world which has been torn apart by war. The philosophical view of "suffering" in these narratives asserts that suffering is not an accepted way of living, as some have incorrectly interpreted this theme in an African context, but it is used as a descriptor for the hardship and turmoil that these women have experienced.

### **Sole/Soul Providers**

All the participants had been separated from their husbands either through death or because their husbands went missing due to the chaos of the war; two of the women were eventually reunited with their husbands. As single heads of household all of these women describe stories of struggling to provide safety and well-being for their children in a horrific environment. Most of these women were forced to constantly flee from one location to another as war broke out throughout Liberia and its neighboring West African countries.

The U. S. Refugee Program (USRP) classifies this group of refugees as "double flight female heads of household" and recognizes their inherent vulnerability. The experience of these women is much like the submission of the African American women that Williams (1993) describes as

These women represent Hagar in the wide, wide world as they try to make a life for themselves and their children. Apparently Hagar in the wilderness as an image of womanhood – poor, hardworking, strong, self-reliant, autonomous, committed

to her family, communicating with God – continues to live and thrive in the African American world. (p. 129)

The Liberian women speak to the need for God's support in providing for them. One woman, Mercy, a Christian whose current husband is Muslim states "Anything God give me, I eat"; another woman, Peace, a Muslim, reports "If God delivered his people so I will be management, small, small." The stories of my participants echo these sentiments that their belief in God was their sole means of survival and that God was their soul protector.

All of these narratives speak to the belief that these women have in God for guidance and protection as they flee their homeland. They express hope that they and their children will survive. In Williams' (1993) framework, hope has more to do with survival and less to do with their own self initiative. Williams (1993) asserts "God's promise to Hagar throughout the story is one of survival (of her progeny) and not liberation" (p. 198).

Blessing, a Muslim mother of seven children who had been separated from her husband for eight months in Liberia, addresses survival and near escape in her narrative as she speaks to several near death experiences where God intervened to save her and spare her children. She recounts a time when she was questioned by rebels about her tribal affiliation. She states that the rebels were killing the Mandingo and Krahn tribes people reporting

They were going to kill me and my son because they said I'm Mandingo. They said I'm Mandingo, they kill you, they kill all your child, they can not leave anyone. Because they say if they leave the son then he will grow up and will want

to pay back. So when they kill you they have to kill all the family in the house. They can't leave anyone. So I said no, leave him. I leave my kids to God.

Because she could speak the Gola language, she was able to falsify her tribal origin and she and her children were not killed. Blessing's interpretation is that the well-being of her children was due to God's fate, not her own ability to deceive her captors, that she attributes their safety. When she does acknowledge her capacity to speak another language, which contributes their welfare, she gives God credit stating "God helped me. I can speak different languages." Later in the interview she speaks of the number of their relatives who died in the war; she reports how miraculous it is that she, her husband and their seven children were all able to survive stating "Well I survived because it was not my time to die." This explanation speaks to their belief that their actions and decisions making did not influence their safety but that it was attributed to a force outside of them - they would say that this was God's work.

### **Heart**

In keeping with the notion that God is the almighty protector, several of the participants spoke of the belief that God can "change someone's heart." Another woman used the terminology of heart when she spoke "God to give me the kind of heart" to describe her inner strength and determination which came from God and helped her to survive. These sentiments, which utilize the metaphor of the heart, relate to the value that these women place on God as being powerful and in her (God's) ability to influence the actions of others and infuse persistence and courage in spite of horrific events. Blessing, a

Muslim woman, describes how she and her seven children were spared death stating

“Well I survived because it was not my time to die.” She later reports

God saved us! Yea, because if a bad person see you, they want to kill you, but if your God - God save you, they will not harm you, they would – Yea, God will touch their heart.

I wanted to be certain that during these interviews I understood the meaning of each participant’s story; therefore, I would rephrase their statement or ask my participant to restate what she had said so that I did not misinterpret. Therefore, in this interview with Blessing, I asked, “So if a bad person, if God touches a bad person’s heart then it will change them and they won’t kill you?” She replied, stating, “They will not harm you” and her husband echoed “We believe in God. We believe in God. There are some people who do not believe in God.” It is this sentiment that speaks to the universality in their belief in God. They were not speaking from their Muslim faith nor were they addressing a Christian God; they were using the discourse of their understanding of a God as good and as protector.

Another woman, Peace, utilized the metaphor of the heart to describe feelings of being overwhelmed by the tragedy and horror of fleeing Liberia. She describes escaping Liberia carrying with her two young relatives. In the bush she sees one of her son’s classmates who had been shot by the rebels and was bleeding to death. She anguished about leaving him or continuing to run for safety. As she described her story, it is apparent that she continues to grieve over her inability to assist him. She was placed in a predicament, having to choose between the survival of one child and another. When she

safely reaches the border and is offered food she refuses stating she can not eat due to this sadness. Her inability to recall events is another symptom and coping mechanism of her grief. She states:

When you go to immigration the people asked, 'What happened?' I said, 'Nothing'. I said nothing in immigration, all the things that happened before me I can't remember too much. When the people asked, I said 'I don't know'. 'I don't remember nothing'. Because my heart was so spoiled.

Speaking later, Peace utilizes the metaphor of the heart again but this time she makes use of it in relation to her hope for Liberia's recovery from the war. She contends that it is through a changing of one's heart that peace in Liberia is attainable. She states

I'm praying to God so what happened in the first place should not happen anymore. God will see the place- the people with the bad heart will get a good heart so the country can settle. And not we, because we, we're old but for we children and the grandchildren. That is the one that we pray for.

The metaphor of the heart appears to be a powerful image. In these stories the women describe the ability of God to change the heart of a person and make them do good deeds; conversely it also supports their belief that people who have a bad heart do bad things. This belief implies that your heart can also be taken from you, by spirits or evil doers; such as the "heart men" of Liberia. This philosophy asserts that free will, choice and self determination are conceptualized differently in Liberian culture than American culture. As social workers we must understand the significant implications that this has on human behavior and value systems.

Heart, is also utilized by Peace as she speaks of her hope for the future. She initially describes her medical problems with her eye which has caused her to be unable to work. She wants to be able to provide in order to send money to her children who are overseas. She later expresses her desire to be reunited with her children with whom she has been separated during the war. She states

Because I praying for God how for my children to get here because that is my main plan I get in my heart. If God could do that one for me then it would be good too . . . If God could do that one for me! If God could do that one for me.

The tenets of Inshallah, or submission to God's will, are expressed in her statement. Later in her story she speaks again of desperately wanting to be reunited with her adult children stating "Oh, will God help me get children for me? I would not know what to do. I would not know what to say to God." It is the poignancy of her story that appropriately describes her heartfelt anguish.

The stories of these women demonstrate that themes of "heart" and "faith" are essential components to understanding the cultural context of resilience and survival for Liberian women. Williams (1993) describes her conviction that

Faith has taught me to see the miraculous in everyday life: the miracle of ordinary black women resisting and rising above evil forces in society, where forces work to destroy and subvert the creative power and energy my mother and grandmother taught me God gave black women. (p. x)

The narratives of Liberian refugee women describe their endurance in the face of human destruction.



The previous chapter examined the global concepts of spirituality and religion through the expression of God-Talk in the collective subjective lives and survival stories of the Liberian women participants. The interpretation is based in a cultural context and within a historical perspective. The following chapter, Kin-Talk, investigates the interrelationship of Liberian familial and cultural institutions in a war-torn country in political turmoil. Despite, or perhaps as a result of, the country's implosion, these women were tested and were ultimately able to demonstrate the biblical values of faith, hope and love expressed in kinship ties.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **KIN-TALK**

All of the women that I interviewed spoke of kin relations in their narratives and organized their life stories around an orientation of family systems. Family systems and relationships are an important aspect of Liberian culture. All of the stories contained themes that reflect the significance of this nurturing system. The extended family and community life has been the center point of Liberian culture; it continues to generate an emotional and economic strength in these women's lives. For these reasons this chapter is devoted to Kin-Talk. There are two major themes that emerged as elements of Kin-Talk, the value of family and surrogate parent roles.

#### **The Value of Family**

Three predominant themes emerge that focus on the family values in Liberia: a collectivity, mothering, and training and raising children. Valuing family is deeply rooted in African culture and the definition of family is broad and inclusive.

#### ***A Collective Ideology: Shared Responsibilities and Equal Power***

The system of valuing kinship care is deeply embedded in African culture. In polygamous relationships, often seen in Liberian Muslim families, wives may have separate or common households and share with each other the responsibilities of cooking, farming and parenting of children. Peace<sup>3</sup>, a Muslim woman who was the second wife out

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<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

of three, in a polygamous marriage, spoke to the camaraderie and cooperation among she and her husband's other wives. She asserts that multiple wives can assist with daily chores, child care, contribute to the family finances and ameliorate infertility problems. She addresses the shared responsibility of household and child care duties stating

We lived in the same house, everybody had a room. We all used to live in the same house, separate, separate. When we cooked, we put it together and we eat. Everybody put it together and we eat. Like me I cooked for one week, and then the other woman cooked for one week and then the other woman cooked for one week and the man was so happy.

Peace expresses the harmonious collaboration of the wives to work together and please their husband. This system depicts a unified family structure in the household chores such as cooking. She reports that this cohesive structure is also used in child care stating

You see, an example like me- when I delivered my child sometimes [another child's name] mother [the co-wife] would say 'This is my son, I'm taking care of this, you don't need to take care of this'. Sometimes I would go and make my business and leave the child with the woman - in daycare with my child. When I am coming I will buy clothes and give to [child's name] mom.

Cooperative child care benefits both of these women's' needs as Peace needed a caretaker for her child and her husband's other wife appreciated being compensated with new clothing. Peace expresses that this arrangement is ideal in a polygamous marriage. She contends that this amicable agreement satisfies the husband and creates a peaceful home.

No power, everything was normal for me because some people, some women can feel jealous when they are two to their husband, every day they make the man

hungry. But we do not do that, we were very peaceful, no nothing, no power, no anything.

In utilizing the symbolism of nourishment, Peace illustrates the importance of conveying love and care through feeding loved ones. In describing her idyllic family system as being “peaceful” she reveals her persona; it was this depiction that precipitated me to select the pseudonym “Peace” for her.

Peace attributes the emphasis on the collective needs of the extended family system in creating a harmonious familial relationship; this philosophy is very different from the traditional American system that promotes individual and nuclear family systems. In Liberian culture it is recognized that individuals ideally bring different strengths and needs to the family and the collective group works together to support and sustain the needs of the group. Peace demonstrates that this ideology is specific to Africa stating

I say oh Africa, different, different. Because in Africa, everyone is not working, everyone not go to school. Okay, you make a farm. The men make the farm, sometimes they find that the women is not able, but if you are married to two women then they help each other. You see.

Because children are so highly valued in African culture, the thought of not having children is unimaginable to Africans. Having children determines one’s current and future health and prosperity, as children contribute to the household and are expected to care for their aging parents. The role of a mother is very highly prized in African cultures. When a wife in a polygamous marriage experiences infertility problems, she

looks towards her husband to procure another wife to provide children for her to raise as her own. Peace recounts this practice affirming

Some women there, they are married but can not borne. They are married ten, fifteen years the woman not borne a child they will say 'My husband no we can not do this. Let's travel and look for a different woman. Let me try and look for one girl for you, to come and help me so we can born for me and you'. You can tell the man like that. 'Let me try and look for one girl so that we can marry that one so that we can be two and maybe that one can borne for you'.

Peace describes this arrangement as amenable to both the husband and the wife. She asserts that the infertile wife may propose this plan as a way to ensure that she will have children of her own to raise. Peace contends that this affords the promise of love and happiness for the husband and his wives. She clarifies this understanding by asserting that this plan must also be sanctioned by God when she reports

Yeah, when the woman get any baby, the woman that was married before –the first woman, she would take all that child to be for her. And she would love those children because she could not borne. She would love the child too [very] much. Then the man will be happy. You see? The man will be happy. But if you marry the woman and the woman not borne no child throughout, you see, you can't do that one. Ten years, fifteen years not borne, you marry another one. If that one comes and God agrees.

Peace asserts that the love for her husband is transferred to his other wives and all of children. She acknowledges that this value and belief is specific to African culture where an emphasis is placed on shared support of one another and not on individual needs. She expresses this by saying

And you love the woman because you love your husband, then you will love your children. If you love your children and the husband and you did not borne any

children you can love that one too. You see the way man loves the child, you see the way the mother loves the child so they—the three of you people. That’s the way they can do in Africa.

Multiple wives secure the stability of the family as children provide a foundation and legacy. This custom has similarities to the biblical story of Hagar where Sarah recognized that in order to protect her future that she needed to have offspring. She therefore encouraged her husband to impregnate their slave so that she could raise the child as her own. This biblical story differs from the practice of polygamy in Liberia because Hagar was not even a second wife; she was Sarah’s slave. In Peace’s polygamous interpretation, the joining of additional wives into the family is not only agreed upon by all parties but is viewed as a positive communal experience that strengthens the family unit.

***Mothering: Limitless Love***

All of the Liberian women with whom I interviewed addressed the composition of their family in their narratives. From a Western viewpoint, these family structures cannot be easily defined as Africans have a fluid family constellation. In describing their families, many of these women did not initially differentiate who were blood relatives and who were adopted into their kinship. Several women spoke of caring for other children in the refugee camps as they recognized that many of these children had been orphaned and needed at least temporary care. Mercy, describes how a young girl “adopted her” to be her mother as the child’s “biological mother” had died in the war. She states

She said, she want to be with me. She like me, because we all suffering. So I was bigger than her, I can born her. So she said, 'Ma' All this time she call me Mom, so she with me . . . She was ten years . . . She say she was coming somewhere around before we got into Guinea before she ever see me. That is where her mother fall down and die. So she will not having nobody til she was with me because she lose her mother in the war . . . She said she want me to be her mother. So we're together.

Unlike American culture where parents select an adoptive child, this orphaned African child selects Mercy to be her mother. Out of an environment surrounded by death, suffering, and sorrow, a new "family" is born. Mercy describes her acceptance of her "adopted daughter" stating

She here now. We were all in the war suffering but she was not big. I can born her. But she come near me, to my side, I draw her near me. I have her to my side together.

Another woman, Grace, a kind soul of a woman who is a widowed mother of six children also cared for children in the refugee camp. She experienced multiple traumas as she and her children fled multiple countries, were separated from their husband/father and extended family members, and encountered a harrowing attack in a Guinean refugee camp which almost killed some of her children.

Arriving at the refugee processing office, Grace describes her protective nature of her children stating "Let come with me here, I will tie all of them together. I tied my children." This figurative statement reflects her need to bind her family together. As she and her children wait to be processed for resettlement she portrays a conscious need to care for other children who were not as fortunate. She reports "In the camp, I have another five boys that's not – that's not my family. I don't know their family, they don't

know my family.” Grace tells how her children would befriend orphaned children and bring them to her to be fed stating “Nobody to ask them, to look out for them. So they would bring their friend in, ‘Mama, they were hungry.’ I said, ‘Here your food, you eat.’ So how come they start coming to my house.”

This giving nature reflects the nurturing spirit that these women possess and the importance of the role of the mothering in Liberian culture. In African American families, this role is often referred to as the “community mother.” These roles describe the symbolic role of mothering as feeding others and sustaining life. Despite their scarce resources, these women did not hesitate to share what they had with children who were orphaned or separated from family by the civil war. Providing food and care for these children in the camps was effortless in these women’s minds despite their limited resources. They expressed a willingness to connect to others through their role as mothers; a position where they felt competent and a function that was necessary to maintaining hope for the future. However, when they experienced the bureaucracies of immigration and resettlement policy and procedures, these mothers faced limitations and barriers. Neither Grace nor Mercy was able to apply for these children to accompany them to the United States. Mercy was later reunited in the United States with her “adopted” daughter as this child, now a pregnant adult, was able to apply for resettlement on her own. Mercy states

Well in Guinea and Sierra Leone, she and myself. She come here now. I came before her. So we did the program together. But I left her behind, Yeah, she left behind. So she came last year . . . So when they were coming to, I told the people, I went to [refugee resettlement] office. I said ‘They should bring [daughter’s name] to be here to care for the baby’. Yeah, I had to **guard** them.



In utilizing the expression of “guarding” her children, Mercy depicts an epistemology of survival. As a widow, she understands the precarious realization of being on her own and the need to protect her “daughter” from a perilous environment. Under these conditions, nurturer must include (the male stereotype of) protection.

Mercy maintains this protective position of mothering despite her own troubles with a strained marriage, limited resources and her need to become acculturated in a new country. This need to mother fulfills the losses that she has experienced, helps her to cope with grief and aids her in constructing a future where peace and love are possibilities.

Other children were not orphaned but due to the chaos of the war had been separated from their parents as many times parents would cross back and forth into neighboring countries and were detained. Faith, describes caring for a child who was left behind and “had no one to mind him” after his mother returned to Liberia. Faith had claimed this child on her resettlement application and was planning to bring him to the United States but the child’s maternal aunt appeared insisting on keeping the child in Africa, maintaining that his mother may return for him.

From an African perspective, these women demonstrate a broad and encompassing definition of family and their role of mother. They recognize the importance in lifting up the community of children. They acknowledge that much like the song by Sweet Honey in the Rock (1981) that “your children are not your children” and that the greatest demonstration of a mother’s love is to protect and insure the survival of the community of children.

### ***Training and Raising Children***

Another culturally fitting practice in many African countries is the care of children and kin. Childcare is an expected shared responsibility of older siblings, especially girls, as they contribute to their family. In many families, children are raised or cared for by extended family members who live in other towns or villages. This arrangement is usually beneficial to the child because he or she may live with extended family in order to attend school. Or it may be as an agreement to assist the extended family members with household duties. Schmidt (2005) speaks to an important and divergent cultural difference regarding family hierarchy. She writes, “In American families, children’s needs are often the center of attention, while in Liberian families, the needs of adults take priority over children’s needs, which also teaches children the value of respecting their elders” (p. 7). The Liberian women I interviewed for this study describe these differences and decisions regarding basic human needs (such as food, shelter and safety) within their families. To a listener or reader that was not culturally grounded, the choices and environment may seem chaotic and even dangerous; therefore a cultural context is important. It is also essential to note that during times of war, conflict, and throughout times of extreme scarce resources, in these women’s stories, the needs of the collective supersedes individual needs and wants. Reliance on collective systems that include kinship, extended family, and community and tribal members become dominant to ensure support, subsistence, and survival.

Several of the mothers and grandmothers spoke of their children living with family members in neighboring towns. Some of these arrangements were because of

educational goals and opportunities. For example, Divine arranged for her baby to live with her in-law so that she could further her education. She is the most educated among all the participants, having attended high school. This opportunity would have been unlikely without the childcare support of her mother-in-law. This kinship care is common in Liberian families where there is a collective effort among family members to assist in individual needs or goals. And although the prospect for secondary and higher education is limited for many Liberians, educational success is highly valued and desired. Moreover, as a married woman Divine was expected to have children and in order to balance her educational goals and her family responsibilities, she, relied on her kinship networks.

During civil war in Liberia, families experienced chaos, separation, and loss. As mothers and kin fled to the bush or other countries for refuge for safety, mothers became permanently separated from their children. All of the women in this study spoke of being separated from their children, spouses, and parents. Even when family members were fortunate to be reunited it was sometimes short-lived when subsequent fighting caused fleeing and additional separation. Divine describes her initial separation from her baby as war broke out in Liberia stating

Because I was still going to school. When I had [son's name], I was going to school. But when the war came I was in school. I jumped, I went in the bush. I walked two weeks in the bush to Ivory Coast. Going, I met some people too. Going too, running for their lives too. I said 'I'll join them too'. Start going to - I start going with them, go to Ivory Coast. While going, we were passing by dead bodies some people, you know, can't make it. They died because of hunger.

Divine recalls that once she reached Ivory Coast she was informed that her parents were killed but that her son and mother-in-law had also made it safely to Ivory Coast. She was reunited with her baby and his paternal grandmother, however this reunion was short-lived. She states that “another war came in Ivory Coast, in that particular place” and she was separated from her mother-in-law. She has never heard if her mother-in-law made it to safety or if she perished in the war stating, “I never got information again.” This narrative speaks to the devastating disruption that war has had on the constellations of Liberian families. Many of the women used the term “scattered” to describe how the Liberian people had to flee their country. The interruption of traditional family networks that had once been the foundation for familial and community systems was threatened. Children and parents were separated from each other and from extended kinship systems and as a result the family systems that once contributed to the well-being of the community-at-large was also under threat. In addition to the rupture of traditional support systems, these stories speak to immense loss and grief that these women experienced as the war ripped offspring and kin from them.

Grace tells her heartrending story of being separated from her two oldest daughters during the war. Grace states she had originally planned to marry the father of her two oldest daughters but his family did not agree to their marriage. Therefore, she decided that after marrying her current husband that she would “not carry the two children to my married home” and she made provisions for them to live with her parents and attend school as it is culturally appropriate for extended family in African cultures to raise and care for children of extended family members. The war, however, triggered a

magnitude of familial separations that broke up important kinship ties. Grace's parents were killed at their farm and she was uncertain whether her daughters were alive and safe. Grace recalls her serendipitous reunion with her oldest daughter after many years of being separated. Grace was at the UNCIEF office for a meeting because she and her children had been approved to migrate to the United States. In the waiting room she struck up a conversation with an African man who said that he was living with a Liberian woman who could no longer speak Liberian English. This woman had been raised by a Guinean woman after fleeing Liberia during the war. When he told Grace the young woman's name she asked to meet her. The man pointed to a young, pregnant woman, but Grace did not recognize her stating that her daughter was "fat and short" and this young woman "slim." The young woman did not recognize Grace either and she said "my mother is fat, you're not my mother." It was not until the young woman asked Grace her name that they realized they were mother and daughter. Grace was called a special name by her daughters that they were able to realize their family connection. Grace recollects her feelings after realizing that her eldest daughter was alive stating

I start trembling like this. I sit down. I trembling like this. I start sweating. I start sweating. The girl cry. All the neighbor come . . . People cry. All the neighbor cry. I stand now, shouting, they pour water on my head. What, what sweat. I'm trembling. So, I said 'Eh. So, my – my daughter alive'.

Even today, as Grace recounts this reunion she embodies the expressive nature of African culture as she claps her hands, shouts and laughs.

Grace reports that when she returned home, after their reuniting, that she thought that she had dreamed about this reunion but when her daughter came to visit the next day

she realized that “Oh! I was not in a dream.” Grace also learned on that visit that her other daughter was also alive and living in Guinea. She learned that the girls crossed into Guinea with the Liberian woman who was a family friend. This woman was later killed by advancing rebels. A Guinean woman took the girls in and raised them. However, by growing up in Guinea the girls lost their native tongue and forgot how to speak Liberian English. Grace applied for her two oldest daughters to accompany her to the United States, but they were denied. She was later told that she could apply for them to come to the United States after she receives her U.S. citizenship, after a waiting period of five years. She states “So I am patient.” Until that time she sends money to Africa for them and speaks to them by telephone, although she reports that communication can be challenging because of the language barrier and the unreliable telephone systems in Africa. Although physically distant from her children, Grace continues to provide and care for them. In providing and caring for her children she is joined by a company of other African mothers who value their role of mothering to protect their children and other women’s children.

The narratives of these women address the collective power of African women to provide and care for children. African women do not differentiate between the “biological” connections of their offspring and other children that they raise. They voice the need for communal care of Liberian children because children are viewed as their future and represent the possibilities of healing in their homeland. As sisters in the wilderness (Williams, 1993), these women appear to be collectively working to protect

and ensure the survival of all children as they “tie them together,” a manifestation of African mothering.

Citing their 1985 work, Martin and Martin (2002) define “fictive kinship” in the African American community as “the caregiving and mutual-aid relationship among non-related Blacks that exists because of their common ancestry, history, and social plight” (p. 166). Although I do not embrace the terminology “fictive” to describe this “real” relationship; I do however agree that this definition equates to the philosophy of mothering in African culture. The Liberian women that I interviewed did not differentiate between their “biological” offspring and the children that they cared for, but embodied the care and aid of all African children.

Barry, in her December 2007 New York Times article, *Exiled to a War Zone, for his Safety*, examines the heart-wrenching decision of a Liberian refugee mother to send her seventeen year old son back to live in Liberia as a means of protecting him from gang life in the United States. After fleeing war-torn Liberia, the family arrived in Staten Island, New York to find a life in a neighborhood with drug deals and gang violence. Fearing that her son was headed down a path of destruction, this single head of household mother tricked him into returning to Liberia hoping that he would be safer in their poverty-stricken and violent homeland than facing the possibility of death or imprisonment due to drug and gang activity in the U. S. After four years of experiencing economic hardship and witnessing death and destruction in Liberia, her son returned to the United States, a changed young man. He returned with strong religious tenets and African cultural values of being “humble and law-abiding” (Barry, 2007, p. A35). In

expressing his understanding of his mother's need to protect him he states, "She showed me how life is. Life is about struggle."

This story not only exemplifies the fierce desire of this mother to protect her son and assure his survival, but it also speaks to his understanding of struggling as being connected to life itself. These sentiments echo the words of Gordon W. Allport as cited in Frankl (1985) where he states "to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering" (p. 11). Suffering is framed in these narratives and in the description of this young Liberian man in a cultural and religious context.

In their narratives, the women that I interviewed did not address any concerns with disciplinary problems in raising their children; however two women did address their anxiety in regards to neighborhood violence. In prior and subsequent visits with Patience she spoke of her fear of living in their low income neighborhood. She reports that the African residents experienced intimidation and several fights had occurred between the African American and the African children. She expressed that the Liberian mothers did not allow their children to play outside for fear that they would be harmed. At least three of the Liberian families that I know have had their homes vandalized. About a month after my interview with Patience she was viciously attacked in her neighborhood resulting in injuries that required hospitalization.

The experiences of this Greensboro, NC mother are similar to the experiences of Grace in Austin, Texas who was tormented by a neighborhood boy. Grace recalls "Sometimes, when I go to work, they come and attack my children. Sometimes, be



watching the TV, they go break the light. Even my first TV was spoiled.” She expresses her anxiety and fear stating

I was confused. I tell them I say I want to leave. I scared. I threatened. Take me from my home. So I scared and threatened. They are American children, others can get gun. In Africa, it hard to be possible to get gun, a little child like this. I said ‘Oh, little children have a gun in this country. This little boy hates me and my family’.

Grace reports that the intimidation by her neighborhood bully has interrupted her children being able to attend school because she cannot protect them when they must leave for school and she has to work. In fearing for their life she asserts

My children can’t go to school. Because they living behind here. My children can’t go to school and come back. They know everybody report **they can kill one of them**. When I get off the bus, they walking, coming home. Sometimes I work in the night, sometimes I work in the day. I don’t want that boy to be able to do anything for me and my family. So I want to leave.

It is almost unimaginable that after a life of fleeing war and hardship that these women and their children are further tormented by violence in their own U.S. neighborhoods, in a country that should have been a safe haven for them. Gozdzia (2004) asserts that “many refugee women become inextricably caught in the web of violence against women” (p. 9). Fortunately, in these two isolated situations both refugee assistance agencies in Greensboro, North Carolina and Austin, Texas assisted these women in negotiating and mediating the neighborhood relations and involved law enforcement. This advocacy process continues Greensboro; the intervention in Austin led to the eviction of the seventeen year old and his family from their apartment after he was charged with

harassing Grace and her children. In keeping with her family-focused perspective and in relating to how she would perceive this problem, Grace remarked “I think their Mommy will have problems in the house.” Grace’s statement reveals her belief that children’s behavior is a reflection of their mother.

This intertwined connection between the role of mothering and survival is a significant theme throughout the life stories of the Liberian women in this study. In relating their life histories these women also weave their philosophical view that values kin-talk to understand formal systems such as the roles of governmental agencies and aid agencies. It is with this lens that this next section is explored.

### **Surrogate Parental Roles**

Many of these women’s stories speak of their relationships with the United Nations and other refugee resettlement or relief agencies as fulfilling a surrogate parental role for them and their children referring to the UN as “our father and our mother.” Because the role of parents is important and revered in African societies this contextual definition spoke to the respect and authority that these families attributed to these agencies and workers in keeping them safe and providing for their basic needs. The women describe several aspects of surrogate parental roles from relief agencies that include crossing into safety, sustenance, protection and nurturance, and limits of surrogacy.

#### ***Crossing: The First Indicator of Safety***

Many times the relief agencies were the first responders in assisting the refugees as they crossed the border. Crossing the border became an initial indicator of safety. One

woman, utilizing religious language, reports how she felt when she and her children were able to cross over into Sierra Leone stating “**You heaven, you can breathe. Yea, you know heaven . . . You tell God thank you.**” She describes that she was able to be reunited with her husband at the refugee camp. This safety zone was often times precarious and short lived as rebels would follow the refugees into safe zones and attacks would break out. Many times the relief workers were not able to determine the difference between the refugees and the rebels, as the rebels would disguise themselves.

Some of my participants spoke of the signs that would differentiate the two groups. They recounted that the rebels would often carry maps, a sign that they would be able to navigate the crossing of borders. Some rebels would “carry mobiles” or cell phones which would enable them to be in contact with their rebel leader. Other distinguishing characteristics of the rebels were that some of them wore boots or showed signs or marking on their legs that indicated that they had worn boots. The process of accurately identifying refugees from rebels became anxiety ridden for many refugees who were in fear of being turned back or of being separated from family members. The procurement of the identification card which determined refugee status allowed the refugees access to some semblance of safety, food, shelter and later assisted them in a durable solution process through the UNHCR.

### ***Providing Sustenance: Meeting Basic Needs***

Most of the narratives addressed the assistance of the United Nations in feeding the refugees. Patience relates that “I live in the Red Cross and United Nations people they were feeding me.” Initially, Patience had fled to Sierra Leone with three of her seven

living children when the war broke out in Liberia. She lived in the refugee camp for seven years until the Liberian war spilled over into Sierra Leone. When fighting erupted in Freetown, Patience was separated from her one daughter who had gone out to look for milk for her seven month old baby. Due to bombing and ambushing of the refugees, Patience and her granddaughter fled to Guinea. She struggled to feed her granddaughter, even attempting to breast feed her so that the child would not die of starvation. It was the United Nations that provided her with milk. Patience recalls

My breast, my breast I give her. I came to the UN office I tell the people this is my daughter here, her mom I do not know where she at, she is too small and I do not get money to buy milk and then the people they can give me some milk. I fill one bottle, I give and it is so small. The whole day she sucked my breast the whole day.

It is in this retelling of her life story that Patience illustrates the crucial relationship that she had with the United Nations in sustaining the life of her granddaughter. For Patience and her granddaughter the United Nations and Red Cross acted as surrogate parents for them in providing for their basic needs. Much like the women acted as conduits in ensuring the basic survival of children during the war, they looked upon the United Nations and other relief agencies to be their own agents of care and protection.

### ***Protecting and Nurturing***

Through the eyes of these participants, the role of these agencies was synonymous to the parental role in protecting and nurturing the refugees. Much like the refugee mothers, these agencies faced the constraints of witnessing desperate situations, being caught in the middle of warring factions, and questioning the survival of children. These

agencies were like mothers who are advocating for their children. Grace describes hearing their predicament on the radio as groups attempted to negotiate an agreement. She states

So we hear the radio talking. We can hear the radio all the world talking for us about how the person of Guinea go ahead the soldier to arrest the refugees. Eh, eh, could they do it? So people all over talking for us. Say they are refugees. They have run away from the same people. So they ask the Guinea government to release the refugees but they can't.

In pleading for the safety and release of the refugees, these surrogate parents were intervening on the behalf of the refugees, "their children." Despite attempts of peaceful negotiations, it was not until the rebels attacked the camp that the refugees were able to escape being held hostage. Grace recalls

We were in, were in that condition until the refugee, the, the rebel take different action from the Sierra Leone. I think the government reinforcement, the way the rebels enter Guinea now. The rebel come in the camp with power. When the rebels come now, the Guinea citizens – the soldier, the refugees, nobody was able to stop. Everybody tried to escape. So that's how come we escaped from the camp.

It was not through the negotiation efforts of the aid agencies that the refugees were released but through a force of anarchy. Grace expresses that after the rebels invaded the refugee camp that the bombing started which set the stage for further bedlam and chaos; destroying what little belongings that the refugees had and forced them to run in terror. The refugees were caught between the rebels and the Guinean soldiers, pleading to be spared. Grace recollects asking the Guinean soldier to let her family into a safety zone; she states

Please let refugees pass. **We are pure. Let the refugees pass.** So I think they open the barrier up now; all the refugees pass. But that time now, people supposed to die, that they go back and in between the rebels and the Guinea soldiers some people go in the water, they die.

As frantic refugees flee towards safety, they inadvertently run to the water and die of drowning. Grace's next statement expresses the multiple flights that many Liberian refugees experienced.

So, **we escaped from there, we come in the camp – another camp.** Guinea government said the refugees cannot enter the cities. Heeeehhh. **So we were in another camp again . . .** We were there until 2001. 2001. We were in another – we were in that camp until 2001. The United Nations started talking to them, talking to them. Please, we want the refugees; we want the refugees.

### *Limits to Surrogacy: Death, Human Destruction, and Vulnerability*

All of my participants witnessed death and human destruction. Many times the UNHCR and the Red Cross were able to assist with the provision of security, food, supplies and medical attention; other times they were limited in their interventions. All of the participants referred to the assistance of these agencies in a positive manner and related to them as their parental figures. Several of the participants gave birth to their children in refugee camps at the United Nations hospitals and found this to be a positive and nurturing experience.

Other families utilized the hospital services for more harrowing experiences. Blessing and her husband recalled the time when there was strife in the refugee camp in Guinea. Initially, the Guinean government would not allow the refugees to enter their country stating that they were rebels, however they later conceded after seeing the

identification card of the refugees. Despite entry into the country, the refugees were not welcomed as they took resources away from an already impoverished country.

In 2000, the Guinean army and citizens attacked the refugees. Blessing and her husband reported that “They were beating us, they were taking all our valuables . . . You see our bodies where we get the mark? All the children they have the mark! All the black mark.” As they retold their story they displayed the scars and marks on their body that resulted from this attack.

Blessing’s husband then relates that there were sexual assaults perpetrated on some of the refugee women and children stating “Even some women, they hold them and they rape them”; he then recalls that his five year old daughter was raped by a Guinean man who was in his thirties.

Blessing and her husband describe how the United Nations came to their assistance in providing medical care for their daughter who was severely injured because of the attack. They reported “The UN come, they see. Because our father, our mother is the UN.” Their story demonstrates the familial position that they placed the United Nations in caring and assisting for their family in a time of crisis.

Another woman, Patience, describes the shooting of her oldest child which came about before the war. Although this event had occurred more than twenty years ago it was obvious that the Red Cross played an integral role in assisting her village with medical care. It is unclear as to the motives for this killing; whether it was intentional or accidental; however, it was determined that Patience’s step father shot her nine year old child. At the time, Patience was not living in her village where her son was residing with

his maternal grandmother. She was told that when he was shot that he was carried to the next town for medical care stating

Yea and the people they take the boy to the village to go to the Red Cross there. It is far. They tie the boy on the head, no car, car can't reach there. They tie the reed on the road. So he died on the people's head.

Patience arrived at her mother's village after her son was buried because she lived too far away to get there in time.

Another participant, Grace, a widowed mother of six children speaks to the limitations of the United Nations, UNICEF, and other aid agencies in being able to feed refugees, especially when conflict would break out in the refugee camps. She recalls a twenty four day period where the refugees were taken hostage by the Guinean soldiers in retaliation for the killing of their soldier by the Liberian and Sierra Leonean rebels. It was suspected that these rebels had infiltrated the refugee camp. She states "the UNICEF can't enter in the camp. No food." It becomes apparent that despite the total dependence that the refugees had on these government and aid agencies in assisting them that due to the unstable environment that the agencies were also restricted in how much they were able to intervene.

### **Interpretation of Life Stories from a Narrative Research Perspective**

The last two chapters have described findings entitled God-Talk and Kin-Talk both of which are at the heart of the life stories of the Liberian refugee women whom I interviewed.



In keeping with the narrative approach of my research methodology it is clear that the life stories of the Liberian women use *selectivity* to include parts of their story or text that participants chose to discuss, of God and Kin. This *intertextuality*, or the relationship between and among narratives, is congruent in addressing the value that faith and families maintain in Liberian and African culture. This interpretation, which is compatible with literature on West African culture, speaks to the emphasis on the collective experience in overcoming hardships. It also highlights their view of hope centered in a religious context.

*Silence*, the part of the story that participants choose to leave out of their stories and which may be used to respond to the scars in their life and areas too painful to reveal may be interpreted incorrectly. An example of this is when Peace reports

When you go to immigration the people asked me what happened, **I said nothing.** I said nothing in immigration, all the things that happened before me **I can't remember too much.** When people asked I said **I don't know, I don't remember nothing.** *Because my heart was so spoiled.*

Peace utilized silence as an expression of her traumatic experience. However, this manifestation could be interpreted by immigration or other governmental officials as deceitful. In my opinion, refugees do not always differentiate between the power and authority of aid workers, governmental officials, or researchers as they view all of these people as conduits in assisting them to improve their current situation.

*Silence* may also be due to a conscious effort of not sharing information as a means of protecting oneself from prior discrepancies in their life stories. From a Western perspective, it can be challenging to understand the family constellations in African

culture. In my research, one participant left out the fact that her one son had been separated from the family during much of their refugee camp experience and was reunited with the family right before they were sent to the United States. This information was shared with me after the interview by the social worker who was present during the interview. In regards to a cultural context, the Liberian woman may have decided that this was not relevant information because in her mind it was not a concern, as her son was currently with the family.

Much like *silence* could be utilized in multiple ways in the life stories of these women, *slippage*, the inconsistencies or contradictions of the narrative of these stories, can also be interpreted in various contexts. *Slippage* may be a conscious decision where the participant wants to avoid sharing information which they feel may harm them. It may also be an “inaccuracy” on the part of the participant, or it could be due to a cultural misinterpretation from the researcher. *Slippage* in these narratives was partly associated with the participants not being able to recall events; many times these women would clarify that they could not always recollect the chronology of events and would attribute this to their lack of formal education by using the Liberian English phrase of “not knowing book.” Other times, *slippage* in their narratives could be credited to the trauma of war and the stress of acculturation; it is not uncommon for refugees to experience overload in dealing with distressing events or in processing new information. Many of the women utilized the term “confused” or “confusion” throughout their narratives to illustrate their poignant and anguishing feeling of life in Africa or in the United States. Lastly, I would argue that *slippage* occurred in a cultural context where what these

women addressed or did not address such as description of their families, children, and timelines, were in relation to their cultural milieu. African families describe family relations in a broad context; where by one may refer to another as their mother, sister, cousin, brother without having blood ties to one another. This practice is used as a sign of endearment or to indicate the level of close bonding that they feel for one another. The concept of bonding or as Grace describes, “tying” people together is symbolic of the commitment that individuals have to the collective group.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS**

#### **Introduction and Overview**

By its nature, the profession of social work is called to a holistic approach to the person in his/her environment (an ecological perspective). This applies to the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice; consequently, it compels the profession to teach its students the skills, knowledge and values of cultural competence. Social work educators must prepare students to understand the sometimes complex historical, social, political, and cultural milieu of their refugee clients. My study of the life histories of Liberian refugee women helps identify the need of students and educators to be open to new paradigms and engage in what Freire (1998) calls “restless questioning” to work effectively with this population. Students need to be challenged to have a wider repertoire in recognizing the value of refugee voices as their stories can teach us lessons of survival, strength, suffering, and struggling. In engaging in a narrative research process, students are faced with listening to voices of the marginalized, invisible, inaudible, and oppressed; they are often times confronted with a radically alternative discourse. As a social work educator, with professional and research interests in refugee populations, I believe that the findings from this research project contribute to social work research and practice and add to the pedagogy of social work education.

This study examines the life stories of seven Liberian refugee mothers and grandmothers, resettled in the United States in the past four years. Utilizing a narrative research methodology, I uncovered and analyze two prominent themes, God-Talk and Kin-Talk. These African perspectives highlight the importance of faith and family as a means of survival and strength for these women. Although limited to seven participants, I believe this inquiry identifies the collective beliefs and experiences of many African mothers and grandmothers who survived their own holocaust. I frame the life stories of these Liberian refugee women through a narrative research lens that honors their voices and opens new understanding of the roles and values of faith and kin in African culture. In addition, I believe that this knowledge can result in new approaches to social work practice, pedagogy and research.

This chapter offers insights, reflections, and recommendations for culturally competent social work practice, for the use of transformative social work pedagogy, and for reciprocally respectful research with refugees. The following section examines the implications that arise from serving refugees for social work practice, including the use of culturally competent approaches and challenges to social work as a profession. The next section examines the implications of this study for social work education including reflections on several theoretical perspectives. The last section explicitly describes implications and recommendations for research. Throughout, the intersections of pedagogy, practice and research with refugee populations are examined.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice with Refugees**

Best social work practice with refugees and immigrants, is centered in an ecological approach, that seeks to understand the person in their environment, and utilizes solution-focused theory, narrative therapy and research frameworks, and prevention models in community development and strengthening. This is a culturally competent framework that should be at the heart of social work intervention both to effectively support newcomers in their acculturation and also to assist social workers in practice and program development. Various aspects of these approaches are described below.

#### ***Culturally Competent Approaches***

Drumm et al. (2003) recommend utilizing an ecological approach in social work intervention with refugees

life's difficulties may arise from any location in the person's environment, **rather than from personal pathology**. Focusing on environmental stressors exponentially increases intervention opportunities through impacting levels, layers, and transactions, rather than focusing solely **on individual functioning**. (p. 70)

Viewing the refugee in a familial or community context capitalizes on the strength of the family/community to provide a foundation of support. Additionally, it recognizes that the family/community also may be in need of mental health interventions. Drumm et al. (2003) draw on the work of Ajdukovic and Ajdukovic (1993) to assert that in "examining children's social support, researchers indicate that the coping of the mother is a significant factor in the child's stress reactions" (p. 69). Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery (2006) confirm that the well-being of refugee children is dependent "on the way in which

their parents deal with these experiences” (p. 95). It is critical that services to children include a component of family assessment and support. Familial abuse (domestic violence, child maltreatment) are all symptoms of high levels of stress that can be triggered by past trauma or current difficulties with adjustment to a new culture and environment.

One therapeutic intervention that has been beneficial to working with refugees is narrative therapy. Berthold (2007) encourages utilizing narrative therapy with refugees which “views problems as being conceptualized and embedded in cultural, social, and political contexts and [asserts] that we develop the meaning of our own lives out of the stories available to us in these contexts” (p. 297). Refugees are able to reconstruct their story using their own definitions and cultural contexts. Utilizing narrative therapy, Liberian refugees were empowered to speak of their beliefs and values (God-Talk and Kin-Talk) when they narrate their stories. Additionally, their epistemology (juju, dreams, spirits, or African religious beliefs), not usually understood in Western society, are valued concepts in their stories. These beliefs, centered in the spirit world, are their understandings of external forces that influence and affect their lives. Their life stories, narrated in an African cultural context, fully reflect the power and significance of African beliefs and mores. Casey (1995-1996) maintains that this progressive philosophical approach uncovers the “need to attend to internal patterns of priorities [where] every narrative is [a] highly constructed text structured around a cultural framework of meaning and shaped by particular patterns of inclusion, omission, and disparity” (p. 234).

Another effective therapeutic approach for working with refugees is “solution-focused therapy.” Solution-focused therapy (Berg, 1994) addresses the client’s strengths and resiliency; it empowers clients to make decisions and provide solutions in their distress. The reality that refugees have survived and overcome horrific atrocities is a strength they can call on in overcoming other new challenges. Pittaway (as cited in Berger, 2004) asserts “Refugee women are survivors. They come with strengths which many of us will never attain” (p. 178). This identification of their past strength and resilience can aid refugee clients in the acculturation process, problem solving, and goal setting. This model has traditionally been utilized with individual clients. However, I believe that it may also be a valuable model when working within a community context. Families and/or communities/tribes can be encouraged to refer to their past resiliency and build on their strengths to incorporate strategies that empower future decision making by the group.

### ***Challenges for the Social Work Profession***

Okitikpi and Aymer (2003) assert that (despite a commitment to justice and serving the disenfranchised) the social work profession has been reluctant to become involved with serving refugees to any significant level. They challenge the profession to “recognize the long-term nature of the phenomenon and the importance of being proactive and engaging early with the presenting problems” (p. 213). These authors maintain that African refugees are given substandard social services. They challenge the social service system to ameliorate this unjust practice and to engage African refugees in



a process of “rebuilding their lives” (p. 221). I assert that this involvement is a process of reciprocal respectful practice and research.

In summary, ecological approaches that value the inherent strengths of families, their community and culture, are useful to social workers as they address psychosocial adjustment issues and try to mentor trans-cultural adaptation. In meeting Aymer’s proposed standards of service delivery, social workers must also take into account the complex need to develop programs which strengthen family and community systems. Social work practice with refugees and immigrants should address individual needs but also incorporate community support systems which begin to strengthen the larger community. An empowered and strengthened community system can then aid individuals who may be in need.

### ***Reflections***

My study, utilizing an ecological model and narrative methodology, begins to define the strengths and resiliency of Liberian refugee women. It identifies culturally competent approaches that value different perspectives when working with refugee populations. The voices of these women have been highlighted as leaders of their family and as the matriarch of the family. I assert that their place in the community is essential to recognizing their strengths and to identifying their hopes and resiliency. Often these women and their role as society’s nurturers and caretakers have been diminished or unrecognized. My study seeks to challenge these inaccurate perceptions and to place these women and their role of mothering in a position of privilege and honor.

Additionally, I challenge the social work profession to accept and embrace concepts of spirituality that have just begun to surface in our profession. In acknowledging the essential importance of religion and spirituality in creating an epistemology of survival and faith for these African women, social workers can come to realize that these beliefs contribute to the strengths and resiliency of African women and their families. This study has examined the intersection of spirituality (God-Talk) and the role of mothers' in African culture (Kin-Talk) and has begun to unfold new ways of discourse in work with African refugees.

In my study, I observe that my students are able to embrace a narrative research method of inquiry because they find it to be effective in connecting social work practice and research. In listening to the life histories of these refugee mothers and grandmothers, students begin to appreciate the power of the collective testimonies of these African women to "give history back to the people in their own words. And in giving them a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making" (Thompson, 1978, p. 226).

Narrative research methodology requires the participants choose where to begin their story; this premise is similar in social work practice ideology where the practitioner values the importance of starting "where the client is" and in addressing the client's perception of a presenting problem. Students begin to identify the ability of narrative research methodology to "display the assets of those ordinarily considered to have none" (Casey, 1995-1996, p. 220).

Additionally, social work practice and research are interconnected in narrative research approaches, as students begin to learn how practice guides research and research

can contribute to best practice. Therefore, in becoming students of the community partners (UNCG Center for New North Carolinians, Glen Haven community center, African Services Coalition) the students and the researcher are able to appreciate the essential links between practice, pedagogy and research, learning from each other and appreciating the expertise of each group. This also builds connections between the social work agencies, the educational institutions, and the refugee community.

### **Implications for the Education of Social Workers**

In this section, I examine and describe the philosophical underpinnings of the pedagogy of preparing social work students for work with refugee populations. This perspective utilizes the theoretical works of Freire, Greene, Giroux, Purpel and hooks as a basis for opening up learning spaces that encourage questioning and discovery. In this analysis, I assume that a transformative learning process can become a catalyst for social change and that the incorporation of service learning and narrative research within the social work curriculum will be beneficial for learning but will also assist the individuals and communities served by social workers.

#### ***Freire, Greene, Giroux, Purpel, and hooks***

In university courses on diversity, cultural studies or social work, teachers often challenge their students to think about and observe their own world in new and unimagined ways. Personal self reflection allows students to explore their own background, values and beliefs; deep examination of local and worldwide policies helps students to understand world events from a different perspective. Critical analysis and engagement in praxis can create new learning and a greater appreciation of social justice

issues. Freire (1998) contends that real education is about the formation of people's identities through a process that liberates people to think critically and to see various ways of existing in our world. He believes that education helps us examine and analyze our social constructions, the ways in which we understand our world; it allows us to question and critique whether social justice is being served and to address issues that negatively affect human beings.

As social workers we also explicitly value the ideal of social justice through our profession's Code of Ethics; and as social work educators we convey the importance for students to begin a process of self reflection and an examination of personal perspectives, (oftentimes biases and prejudices) in assignments and classroom exercises. This intentional pedagogy allows students (and we, the teachers) to recognize and deconstruct previous beliefs and assumptions. Such realization stimulates an energy to question.

Freire (1998) states that

Curiosity as restless questioning, as movement toward the revelation of something hidden, as a question verbalized or not, as search for clarity, as a moment of attention, suggestion, and vigilance, constitutes an integral part of the phenomenon of being alive. (p. 38)

In the Freire model, the process of discovery in education incorporates both self and social understanding; that facilitates change in one's perspective of the immediate environment and the broader world. Part of exploring self, is a process of becoming "wide-awaken" (Greene, 1988). That transformation takes place for both teacher and student. It is never ending and results in awakening, awareness, and full consciousness. I believe that such a transformation occurred in my study, as teachers and students learned

about themselves and about the power of the participants' voices being heard and valued. As the participants told their stories they also became self-aware. Greene (1988) utilizes Marx's concept of praxis, a process of reflection and action, in which students and teachers understand themselves and then begin to identify the obstacles in their world. Praxis is a dynamic process where change leads to subsequent change. When individuals are able to speak **of** and **from** their experiences, they can validate the truth of their experiences and perspectives, and consequently work towards change. Greater understanding is gained when individuals utilize and respect the voice as a reflection of self. Acknowledging the inequities, oppression, and fragility of our world provides for greater understanding.

Critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2001), a way of understanding learning, also addresses self and social understanding that is designed to bring change. In particular, it strives for personal, moral, and spiritual changes brought about with compassion and humanity. As one views a larger perspective of our world, we make connections or understandings outside ourselves and see our interrelatedness and dependency on others more clearly. We begin to build community—a common unity, in bringing about change.

Purpel speaks of the educator as change agent and prophet. He believes that

the educator as prophet does more than re-mind, re-answer, and re-invigorate - the prophet-educator conducts re-search and joins students in continually developing skills and knowledge that enhance the possibility of justice, community, and joy. [The educator's] concern is with the search for meaning through the process of criticism, imagination, and creativity. (Purpel & McLaurin, 2004, p. 110)

The educator as prophet is a visionary, who challenges students to not accept “common sense” but to rise beyond the status quo, strive for higher standards and ideals, and imagine possibilities to promote justice. The educator as prophet understands that education is not fixed, and that paradigms can shift. This hope sustains an arduous journey for discovery of truth.

One path to the discovery of truth is through engaged pedagogy, the utilization of hermeneutics and the dialectic of hope. hooks (1994) believes that engaged pedagogy “means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). Teachers can become learners with their students and model a process of curiosity and questioning. Education can become less fractured and more holistic and increasingly encompass body, mind and spirit. Teachers strive to be receptive to the sharing of personal experience in their classrooms; this sharing becomes a hermeneutic or interpretive experience, and is employed by the teacher as well as the student. Varying epistemological viewpoints and perceptions are seen as means of expanding knowledge through the appreciation of diverse voices, previously stifled or marginalized. The development of new languages and structures builds a foundation for transformation and dialectic of hope is set into motion. Once we learn this new language and new ways of understanding our world, we cannot return to previously limited and constricted ideologies. However, we do have new choices; to select a deeper sense of meaning and elect possibilities that have purpose.

Transformative education takes on the mission of changing the student and teacher so that they interact and relate to the world in which they live in new ways. Such transformative relationships demand social justice, strive to bring together freedom and community, and encourage continuous and flowing change. Transformative education values knowledge that incorporates praxis; teachers and students gain a greater understanding of themselves and others through reflection, and an appreciation of social justice through action.

### ***Reflections***

My study sought to engage teacher, students, and community in transformative learning. Narrative research inquiry benefits learning when it encourages students to engage with under-served populations. This process is mutually beneficial when it assists the under-served to value their own voice and identify their own needs and simultaneously teach students creative ways to work with the marginalized in our society.

Two basic principles of social work education are, first, a process of critical self reflection and, second, a commitment to examine social justice inequities. My research study supported both of these principles as students reflected on their understanding of the plight and struggle of the participating Liberian refugee women. Students (and I) began to understand the strength of Liberian refugee women and of their faith in a God who would support, guide and protect them; this faith sustained them as they strived to survive. In seeking an African perspective, we also learned to define religion and kin in more fluid terms. This perspective recognizes the value of collective subjective and the importance of incorporating a community into social work services and interventions. In

this study, students also were helped to reflect on their position of privilege and power. With this awareness they began to question inequity and injustice.

I recommend incorporating service learning pedagogy into the traditional social work education curriculum. Service learning pedagogy allows students to personally connect with clients in order to increase their cultural competence. It models an ecological perspective, understanding the person as part of their environment. The student and educator become acculturated to the values, beliefs, and mores of the community. They are able to struggle against the assumption that the educational institution possesses a privileged place for knowledge. Moreover, it allows students and educators to assist the community to identify its needs. This philosophical approach assumes that communities are experts in identifying their own needs and are able to articulate their goals and plans.

I assert that valuable learning experiences which engage the student and teacher in “restless questioning” (Freire, 1998) are created through implementing a service learning pedagogy into social work curriculum. This educational philosophy can be employed in practice and research courses. Traditionally some practice courses, such as field placements and internships, have allowed social work students to actively connect with families and communities in their own environment. I promote the incorporation of this model to all practice courses as it is imperative that social workers not dictate their own values and beliefs to their clients but listen and learn about the cultural intricacies and values of the communities they serve. Additionally, this service learning model should be integrated into research courses where oral history assignments can begin to reflect



reciprocally respectful pedagogy and students can begin to appreciate and value an interpretation of collective subjective and open up to learning new world views.

A pedagogical lens for the research process also offers distinct perspectives and insights. Utilizing narrative research, a form of critical pedagogy, is a way to understand and approach social work education. It is consistent with a social work ethos that values listening to the life stories of those, not typically listened to. When educators and students engage in this method of inquiry together, mutual discovery can occur. Teacher and students listened together and began to deeply hear the personal experiences of Liberian mothers and grandmothers and began to appreciate the power of these life stories. As they engaged in the narrative research process, the students understood the importance of respecting the power in giving voice to these women. This confronted us with new thoughts and beliefs. We started to understand the historical, political, social, and cultural context of Liberian refugees, in transition from their country of origin to the United States.

Through this educational process students (and I) are challenged in hearing the voices and values of these African refugee women. Their epistemology of survival as dependence on faith and kin are in great contrast with American ideals of individuality, self determination, and secular values. It is imperative that when working with Africans, specifically African refugees, social workers redefine current professional values and beliefs that identify faith and family in a Western context.

I define God-Talk as the language that manifests the incorporation of spirituality and religion in everyday lives. An epistemology of faith or God- Talk, as interpreted by

the Liberian refugee women, is the submission to God's will and grace. This interpretation encompasses their understanding of survival and protection. This philosophical framework posits that it is not individual willpower or resolve which determines their fate but faith and submission to God's plan which shapes their lives. Many American educated social workers may interpret this ideology as weak, lacking in fortitude, or possibly learned helplessness. I assert that we need to reconstruct an alternative discourse in viewing faith and God-Talk as a collective discourse which provides comfort, direction, and guidance to Africans in crisis. We must seek to understand the cultural context of this language and resist our professional proclivity to steer away from religious dialogue. As social workers we must create hermeneutic understandings which acknowledge the African tradition of faith in affording inherent strength and resiliency to survive.

Additionally, I posit that when working with refugee clients, specifically Liberian refugees, that social workers must be challenged to reframe the context of family or Kin-Talk to an African context. In defining Kin-Talk as the language that expresses the cultural interpretation of family, I submit that the American definitions of family are constricting, especially when working with Africans, as they typically refer to immediate kinship ties. This definition is limited and conflicts with African descriptions of kin as encompassing broad community networks. Social workers must be educated to interpret these varying definitions as not only acceptable but beneficial to working with families. In utilizing this African definition in an ecological model, social workers can expand on employing wide community resources to assist their clients. Social workers must also

realize that when working with Africans that they too are incorporated into this network. As community members, social workers are identified and associated with the community in regards to their kinship ties. It is not uncommon for refugee clients to question their social worker about personal family ties and connections as these are not interpreted as off limits or professional boundaries, and actually the absence of this inquiry is construed as rude. Additionally, social workers must recognize that African refugees relate to their worker and refugee aid organizations in terms of personal connections and may refer to them as “sister,” “mommy,” “father,” or as my one participant expressed “the UN is our mother and our father.” I assert that this language, used as a term of endearment, signifies the refugee placing the social worker in the parental role to protect, nurture, and guiding them. Although social workers may initially find this disconcerting, it is essential in understanding the cultural context of their work with refugees.

This proposed reconstruction of values and ideas surrounding faith and family, albeit radical for many social workers, is crucial in creating a paradigm that values the role of mothering and religion in strengthening families and communities. As clients who have been scarred by trauma and violence, the role of the informed and compassionate social worker can provide hope and healing.

### **Implications for Social Work Research**

In this section I suggest utilizing a strength-based approach in research projects that involve refugees and immigrants. I suggest a timeline for conducting narrative research with this population. Last, I affirm the need for researchers to engage in

individual or community service projects when working with these newcomers as a just way to reciprocate the contributions of those participants.

***Shapiro, Berger, and hooks***

Social workers must be challenged to go beyond direct practice and to document their work with refugee populations through research and publication. Social Work research on refugee populations is limited. Published research tends to focus on the pathology of refugees and utilizes a mental health lens when working with this community. This perspective is deficit focused; I recommend that the social work profession take a strengths perspective when conducting research with refugee and immigrant populations. This position assumes the possibility of change and views these research participants as social agents for change, a mind-set that is empowering. Shapiro (2004) asserts that educating for peace is

a matter of creating culture of peace—one rooted in respect for life, social justice, humility towards one's own truth, empathy for the other, and a commitment to addressing differences and conflict among us through democratic processes of dialogue and reciprocal understanding. (p. 228)

I believe that the concept of “educating for peace” can be easily be broadened to the concept of “research for peace”; where inquiry has the potential to create social justice and offer a dialogic process, allowing us to hear new and diverse voices.

In this study I have intentionally tried to listen deeply to refugee's stories. While it is not uncommon for refugee resettlement workers (social workers) to hear their clients speak their life stories, these professionals infrequently initiate this type of engagement and they rarely document their clients' narratives and life stories. This may be partly due

to the crisis-centered nature of work with refugees when social workers are pulled in various directions to meet immediate needs for clothing, food, shelter, educational needs and safety. Additionally, there may be initial language barriers that prohibit the refugees from being able to express themselves completely. I believe that conducting narrative research with refugee populations may be optimally utilized after the initial phase of resettlement by the social worker is completed. After the immediate trauma and adjustment phase are past, refugees may be in a better position to reflect upon their life stories and to use the process to view their strengths and skills as a way to meet future challenges.

In her research with immigrant women, Berger (2004) found that “narratives of women reveal a great deal of pragmatism, flexibility, and effective problem solving” (p. 179). This realization may further empower refugee and immigrant women to see their strengths, fortitude and resiliency. Pittaway (as cited in Berger, 2004) asserts “**Refugee women are survivors. They come with strengths which many of us will never attain**” (p. 178). In conducting my interviews I began to fully understand the cathartic nature of storytelling for these women. Although a few of the women were initially reserved when they began their stories, it became apparent that the process of sharing their story offered these women a forum for self expression, reflection, and ultimately a confirmation of their own pain and healing. The healing process can instill hope that their pain was not in vain; and that their future will be better than their past. Their faith in God and kin is manifest in their healing, resiliency, courage, love, and hope. The life stories of these women echo these beliefs and offer hope that despite their often harrowing experiences

that these women strive for survival and goodness in the world. hooks (2001) speaks of the power of love stating “even when we cannot change ongoing exploitation and domination, love gives life meaning, purpose, and direction. Doing the work of love, we ensure our survival and triumph over the forces of evil and destruction” (p. xxiv). I assert that this work of love is mothering.

### ***Reflections***

As a social scientist, I believe that social work must utilize a perspective that tries to understand the plight of refugee women and recognizes their strengths and fortitude as a means of survival and a demonstration of hope and love. In utilizing a feminist framework we can hear the marginalized, and many times inaudible, voices of women who have been dispossessed who can teach us a great deal about humanity. From a micro social work perspective, the examination of the life stories of refugee women can expand our understanding of mothers’ work and women’s work. This knowledge can assist us in understanding the needs of the family and community as well as offer insight into women’s leadership.

Additionally, we must understand that as researchers we have an ethical responsibility to conduct research which is reciprocal. In utilizing a narrative research methodology, the very nature of this process is shared; however researchers also need to be mindful to assist participants and their communities with their tangible needs such as engaging in community service. To illustrate this point I give the example of my first interview in Austin, Texas. At the end of the interview I asked my participant if she had any questions for me. I did not expect to hear many questions as I was essentially an

outsider and was not associated with any resettlement or social service agency. However, not understanding my limitations and authority, she asked me if I could assist her in exploring the delay of her daughter's green card. Fortunately, my sister's colleague who was present during the interview and who was familiar with this family and the refugee process for Immigration and Naturalization in Texas could assist me in addressing her needs. This case however was a reminder for me that refugees and immigrants may not differentiate roles due to the fluidity of relationships. Additionally, and maybe more important, I wonder whether this (method of questioning asking for assistance) is simply the refugee's tenacity and perseverance that has assured their survival. For this reason social workers should strive to meet needs identified by their participants when engaging in research.

From a macro social work perspective, the use of narrative research as a methodology with refugee and immigrant participants, affords the opportunity to critically examine policy and practice. An understanding of immigration policies, cultural practices and beliefs, and historical events is essential for social workers who work with refugee populations. This knowledge created in conjunction with transformative education allows all of us to engage in a humanitarian learning environment.

### **Conclusion**

This study has only begun to tap the social work knowledge and sensitivity needed to work with African refugees, specifically Liberian women. It is my hope that this inquiry can be the spring board for future research projects that incorporate culturally competent practice, transformative pedagogy and collective research projects. There are

countless opportunities to learn lessons about faith, strength, courage, resiliency, love, and hope from these women. In addition, I hope that this project can serve as a legacy for these women and their families. Lastly, I hope that this study can create a forum for diverse dialogue which can lead to moral and spiritual changes.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Rubric

Name/Pseudonym	Divine	Peace	Mercy	Faith	Patience	Grace	Blessing
Age	38	Unclear	41	35	61	49	Unknown
Tribe	Grebo	Mandingo	Krahn	Grebo	Krahn	Mandingo Mother was Lomo	Mandingo
Religion/ Tribe of Husband	1 <sup>st</sup> husband Muslim Mandingo Current husband is Grebo	Mandingo/ Muslim	1 <sup>st</sup> - Christian 2 <sup>nd</sup> Muslim	Christian/ Evangelist	Bassa	Muslim	Mandingo
Age at Marriage	20	Can't remember > 20 (?28)	17	17	16	Unknown	17
Religion	Pentecostal	Muslim	Christian	Christian/ Evangelist	Church of Latter day Saints	Muslim (Mother was Lomo and Christian)	Muslim
Education	12? Catholic school	0	0 Husband College	Unknown	0	Unknown	0 Husband H.S.
Marital Status	Married Widowed x 2	Widowed 2 <sup>nd</sup> wife out of 3	Married x2 First Husband in Africa	Married	Widowed	Widowed	Married
# Children born	4	3	3 or 4 Unclear	3	12 7 living – six girls and one boy		

### Interview Rubric—Cont'd

Name/Pseudonym	Divine	Peace	Mercy	Faith	Patience	Grace	Blessing
Birth place of children	1 son was born in Liberia, 1 son and da born in Ivory Coast, 1 son born in US	3 born in Liberia	Liberia and refugee camp	1 da born in Liberia 1 da and 1 son born in Ivory Coast	All in Liberia	All in Liberia	2 born in Liberia, 3 born in Sierra Leone, 2 born in Guinea
# Children in US	3 sons and 1 daughter all in US	0	1 daughter in US	3	2 daughters in US	2 sons and 4 da in US	5 sons/2 daughter All in US 19-6yo
# of children outside of US  Residing Country if known	0	1 son in Ghana 1 son and 1 da in Guinea	1 son (Unclear) 1 da in Liberia	0	5	2 da in Guinea	0
Working in US?	No Stay home for kids	No- eye problems	Yes- 1.5 jobs	No – health problems	No- Wants to work	Yes - Grocery	No Stay home for kids
Health in US?	Good	Eye problems	Good	Poor- Diabetes	Good	Good	Good
U.S. State at time of initial resettlement	NC	NC	NC	NC	New Hampshire	Arizona	Texas
Current U.S. State of residence	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	Texas	Texas
Countries in refugee camp	Ivory Coast	Guinea	Sierra Leone '90-97 Guinea '97 –'03	Ivory Coast	Sierra Leone '90-'97 Guinea '97-'03	1991 Sierra Leone  Guinea	Sierra Leone  Guinea '97-'00



## Appendix B

## Maps of Liberia



